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DOCTOR WHO™

RE:COLLECTIONS



THE BEST OF SHORT TRIPS

Version 1.0



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Recollections
The best of Short Trips... chosen by the editors.

Short Trips is a series of 28 short-story anthologies featuring contributions from many of *Doctor Who's* most popular authors from the worlds of television, print, comics and audio, as well as new talent and fresh voices. **Recollections** brings together one story from each collection, each chosen by - and with an introduction from - its editor.

Short Trips: Zodiac

Zodiac: the first *Short Trips* collection, and my first solo commissioning project. How exciting was that? We'd decided that themes were good, and that a nice, neat, ordered one - twelve stories, each with its own individual theme on top - was a good way to go. (As it turned out, it wasn't, as I shall explain - but that's the learning curve for you.) I bombarded everyone I could think of in the world and invited them to pitch, and a lot of them did, and most of them for the same slots. And, with the restrictive nature of the subject matter, one couldn't just swap them around. Oops.

When a short story is done right, it is fabulous. A short story, you see, shouldn't just be a bit of writing that's not very long. You can do things in short stories that can't be done in any other medium. Prose can be used to achieve effects that could never be realised on screen or audio. Yes, but there are novels, you may point out. True, of course. And I'm not saying you couldn't sustain a particular conceit for an entire novel, but its appeal may pale, in the same way that it's hard to eat seventeen slices of even the nicest chocolate cake. A short story, however, can live fast and finish young. And that brings us neatly to my selection: '*I Was A Monster!!!*' by (the then 'unknown') Joseph Lidster, an almost perfect use of the form.

Jacqueline Rayner

‘I Was A Monster!!!’
Joseph Lidster

And hence one master-passion in the breast,
Like Aaron’s serpent, swallows up the rest.
Alexander Pope, An *Essay* on *Man* (1733)

Day One

Saturday morning. Pain and panic. So no change there.

Thoughts and memories all jumbled but starting to file themselves into...

Left the office and went to Maguires. Then on pub crawl around Dublin with workmates. Got very drunk and didn’t know where I was. Went to one pub. Like Pizza Hut with a bar. Stood there. Took the mick out of the place with Billy. Thought that Gloria a 40-something colleague looked great. Oh God, did I say anything to her? Got chips. Went to a club. Danced. Drank. Danced. Drank. Danced. Blank.

Just woke up on the sofa fully dressed and still with my bag on my back. So confused. Hung-over. Grey. Did I say or do anything stupid or offensive last night? Remember me and Billy were loud but can’t remember if I did anything bad myself. Could have offended half the people I work with. Was I just wrecked or did I make a real tit of myself? Darren lost his ticket and couldn’t get his coat. Helped calm him down so can’t have been that bad. But did get so lost and nearly die which is bad. But didn’t fall asleep in a shop doorway which is good. Anyway, I digress. So woke up. Feeling bad. Had tea and toast. Had more tea and toast. Got quilt cos so cold. Have spent the last couple of hours watching *Student Bodies, USA High, Sabrina* and other teen-American crap. Now know the true meaning of friendship. ‘I remember when you guys were all there for me when I was doing too much and was trying to organise my life with pills.’ Flashback. So confused. Feel like the world has subtly changed. Things look the same but everything feels just that little bit out of

phase. So I'm watching city guys from usa high student bodies being saved by the bell while having california dreams about sabrina the teenage witch, you know, learning about the true meaning of friendship and how you should follow your dreams - no wonder there are so many shootings in America - and Cody is in the comedy guidance counsellor's office. They're babbling on and I just don't give a toss. Cody comes through the door when suddenly - I'm there behind him I'm on the TV I'mjust a character. God, I'm fu...

And then I remember. In. Glorious Technicolor. Detail:

The music is hypnotic and euphoric with the lights swallowing all natural tones as everyone is bathed in a mysterious green and I'm dancing, I'm dancing because for that moment it is all I know. The vodka coursing through my body, its energy flowing through me like blood and I'm looking for my for my workmates, for my bestest friends in the whole world, but they're not here. Panic! Stumbling through the endless stream of office workers seeking respite from typing and filing and spreadsheets and buses and bosses and colleagues - all looking good, all locked in their own paradises. A writhing mass of angels in suits.

Outside. The cold night air hitting me and my mind beginning to clear. Thoughts of angels and music and love and magic leaving my mind as the mundane realities of life beginning to slowly return to me. Still off my face but here outside it feels wrong not right. Starting to think about that thing I've got to do. That going home thing. Where am I though?

Walking and becoming fascinated by the cool blue moonlight. Can still hear the music inside the club but now the tune of my feet crunching into the gravel beginning to take over. Looking up at the moonlit sky, clear and full of stars. Watching the tall trees sway gently in the breeze - the wind passing through their leaves like a thousand whispering souls. Unnerving. Must be outside of city. No walls. And now the staccato screech of the music is gone. I had been safe in my electric, false paradise and I'm not sure how to react in this new natural world. Decide to stop and have a smoke. Gliding over to a small stream and sitting down. Could have been there minutes, hours or years before remembering why I stopped.

Reaching into my pocket, taking the last cigarette from the packet and

lighting it. The flame bursting into life, its warmth flashing across my face. Looking into the stream, my eyes staring into my reflection's.

Inhaling, I see a whole other world reflected in the flowing water. This is the most peaceful, the most real moment in my life. Me, my reflection, the whispering trees, the bright silver moon and the glowing end ofmy cigarette. This is how I feel -

And I jump (fall?) off the sofa as I remember what happens next.

* * *

'Got a spare cig?'

My solitude being interrupted by a voice. Despite my state of mind, or, perhaps, because of it, I'm immediately noticing what's wrong. Can feel the presence of another person standing behind me. Wisps of red fabric darting in front of my eyes. There is someone standing behind me. Yet I know from the reflection in the water that there is no one standing behind me. Whoever this girl is, she isn't real.

And my head pounds as, collapsing on to the floor, I switch off the telly. Switch off the fake kids. Switch off the stars.

'Its my last one but you 're welcome to share it.'

Am speaking which is good. She is sitting down beside me. Pale white skin, red hair, the same colour as her dress. A devil, tempting me. Beyond beautiful, she is breath-taking.

'What are you?' I'm asking as I pass her my half-smoked cigarette. Taking the cigarette, placing it between her lips and smiling as she inhales. 'Why are you here?' she is asking.

A thousand answers rushing through my mind. Thoughts of offices and clubs and music and workmates. 'I'm lost!'

'We 're all lost.' She is smiling as she leans towards me. Whispering into my ear. 'It's a defining characteristic of our generation.'

And I fall against the telly, my hand tingling against the static of the screen as I remember -

I'm not struggling while she is smiling. I'm not struggling as two of her teeth are growing smoothly down. I'm not struggling as she is placing one cool hand on the side of my neck and I'm not struggling as the teeth are piercing the skin of my neck and puncturing into my veins. Feeling the blood streaming out of my body and the natural paradise around me spinning out of all control. Pulling away from me and staring into my unfocused eyes she is telling me she can taste my ecstasy. She's going in for the kill but, now, hearing someone approaching, she is pulling back. She is running and I am falling. Falling backwards, a fall that is seeming to take for ever and ever. And my head is falling into the soft wet grass.

And my head rests against the hard, solid glass.

And I'm feeling the blood flowing from my neck.

And I feel hope, any hope that nothing happened, pour out of me.

* * *

And I'm lying on the grass and the world stops spinning and I feel myself changing. And I'm crying as I'm looking up at the stars.

And I turn to look at the screen but the stars are gone.

And I'm crawling to the flowing stream and I'm looking down. Drunk, tired and without hope, I don't make a sound at the fact that my reflection is gone. I am no longer part of the natural world.

And on the screen, the stars are gone. And there is just me. And I crave.

Day 12

Murder always takes the victim by surprise. They waste precious moments of their final day applying lipstick or hair gel. They look at themselves in the mirror, not realising that they will never do this again. They grab their keys from their bedside tables and leave

their homes just... just not knowing that they'll never see their bedside tables, bottles of cosmetics or their own reflections again. Sometimes, though, the murderer is as surprised as their victim. They don't realise, as they pick up their keys, that they're about to step on to an entirely new path.

The Capricorn Killer (from the novel *I Was A Monster!* based on the 2003 film *I Was A Monster!* based on the posthumously-published diaries of the Capricorn Killer)

It's been some time since my rebirth. I have disappeared from society. I spend my days asleep and my nights in bars and clubs. Safe and anonymous. But still I crave. I desperately try to block out my hunger with alcohol and various drugs but, like my shadow, it's always there. And then...

The crushing reality of what I have become hits me as I leave the club. I run down a side-street, hardly noticing the lashing rain. I need peace away from the endless beat of the music but I cannot escape. In the distance, I hear a group of drunken tourists leaving an 'Oirish' bar and their laughter fuels my despair. I turn down a black, silent street and the darkness engulfs me. I lean against the soaking brick wall and the tears begin. The hunger inside of me is devastating and unending. I know what I must do. I've no choice. My body shakes with despair and fear. Can I? Is it possible for me...? But it's what I am. What I am become. My body shakes more violently now as the bloodlust consumes my entire body and I look to the stars and scream. An unending scream of rage and anger and hunger and... and someone is walking past me and - he's wearing a Roy Keane football shirt and tracksuit bottoms. He's slightly taller than me and skinny. He's feverishly smoking a cigarette as he strides through the rain. He's looking at me through tiny black eyes. He's looking at me as I scream to the stars. He's looking at me -

'Freak,' he mutters as he sloshes through the rising puddles.

FREAK? My limbs are shaking uncontrollably as I launch myself at him. I jump on his back and we fall to the ground. FREAK? He's taller than me and been getting into fights since he was three but I am hungry. He's winded but rolls over to look at me. And I grab his

ears and I pull his face towards me and I slam it into the - his head... the rain pours... and his head jerks... and pours... and his head jerks back... and pours... and his head jerks back... and pours... and his head jerks backs and explodes into a red mist and the blood gushes out and there's a torrent ofred flowing. So much red! And my face is streaming with red rain and I panic. Rising panic - I can't see! I hear a sound like crunching gravel and I wipe my eyes dry on the sleeve of my jacket and look down at my...

and his cigarette is extinguished in the puddle. The crimson puddle. The puddle that's becoming more blood than rain. FREAK? And I bring his head up once more and smash it down once more. More blood. I do this again and again and again and the back of his head just disappears. His left ear comes away from his face with a terrifying tearing sound and I'm left holding it. The fear in me is overtaken by something else as I, laughing hysterically, hold the ripped-off ear to my lips and whisper into it:

'Who's the FREAK now?'

Then the hunger takes over and I scramble over him and begin to drink. I crawl through the puddles drinking the diluted blood. And as I gorge, the rain and blood soak through my T-shirt and designer jeans but I just don't care. The blood fuels my body and soul and I feel alive. I have never felt so EUPHORIC as I do now - slurping the blood of my kill from the back of what used to be its head.

And now I am full. I reach into his pocket and pull out a soggy packet of Silk Cut. With difficulty I light one, inhale and then fall, that unending fall to the pavement, content.

Day 13

The following morning my heart hurts but I suspect it's more the cigarettes than guilt.

I am not me. I stare into the mirror but there's no reflection. I no longer exist except on the TV. Watching the news.

'...has not been available for comment since escaping the *Big Brother*

compound. In other news, police say that the murders of Lorcan Murphy, Sonia Fusciardi and Shane Fisher are, indeed, related.

The three victims, all aged in their early twenties, were attacked and viciously murdered as they travelled home from the city centre at different times during the last week. The murderer, whom the press have dubbed the “Capricorn Killer” struck... ‘

The Capricorn Killer. That’s who I am now.

I am not me. I am whatever you say I am and - and his eyes stare at me dispassionately as I nail them into the wall - next to the photos of me in pubs and a joint-rolling mat. ‘Why are you called the Capricorn Killer?’ asks Kirsty from the photo in Mullingar. ‘Yes, tell us!’ asks the bar owner in San Antonio. ‘Tell us!’ ask my unblinking audience. ‘Why shertainly,’ I reply, putting on my best Sean Connery impression.

‘The reason I am known as the Capricorn Killer is because of my goatee! I know - a crappy link, isn’t it? But that’s all you need these days. Any kind of connection and the public love it.’

And I explain to the wall of seeking eyes why I am now known as the Capricorn Killer instead of... well, you don’t care who I was before, do you? Before, I was merely an office worker who did what all the other drones did. I was merely a non-speaking extra, a member of the public. Now, though... I am the Capricorn Killer because, although I can’t see my own reflection in mirrors or windows or handrails on buses, for some reason I can be caught on camera. I suppose it’s necessary otherwise I couldn’t have the notoriety. I couldn’t have the fame.

And the cameras show that I have a goatee.

Yep, it’s as tenuous as that! Mad, isn’t it? I have a goatee and that makes them connect me with goats and the devil and Capricorn and all that. Every killer needs an identity. According to the websites, the goat is an ‘unclean beast, obsessed by the sex drive. Apparently in tarot cards the goat appears on the Death card. And, supposedly, it represents a ‘return to nature’. I suppose that bit could be true.

‘Suppose there is something to it?’ I ask Freda who stares at me from the office party photo. I have returned to nature. And yet, I yearn. I yearn more for the fame than I do for the blood. My hunger won’t be sated merely by superficial earthly offerings such as blood - I crave the stars. I crave to be a star. And my new life, the life my red-haired devil gave me, gives me that chance!

Day 24

The WARMTH is leaving the publicist’s body as I hug her tightly and I whisper into her ear: ‘Did you know that when the police issue photo-fits, they give them mad staring eyes on purpose? Look at this terrifying inhuman monster! He could be coming for you next! So if you recognise him then you should shop him now! My picture didn’t need touching up. My eyes really do stare like that! Look at them! LOOK AT THEM!’

But she ignores me because she’s dead.

Day 27

You’d have thought the endless exposure to the results of my crimes would have depressed me. You’d have thought. Instead, it’s had the opposite effect. Indeed, I now realise how it’s all drama. The woman crying on TV pleading for her daughter’s killer - her tear-stained face plastered over the front pages of every tabloid newspaper - could well have been an actress. If she was real, then surely she is enjoying this fame that I have given her! She will never be forgotten. My craving for fame and recognition is superseding my baser cravings. Frantically I type ‘Capricorn Killer’ into Google - twenty-three websites now mention me! Twenty-three - one for every year ofmy life! My face stares out from TV appeals and newspapers screaming out for the return of hanging. I decide to visit a chatroom but cannot use the nickname ‘Capricorn Killer’ as someone else has taken it. Nor can I use ‘Capricorn2002’, ‘ZodiacKiller’ or even ‘DublinPsycho2002’. I have fans! But... but it’s not enough. There are still people not talking about me. The stars on *Big Brother* have now gone but have been replaced by others. And the people I really want to notice me, the people who really matter, my peers, the drinking, working, Generation X, Y or Z or

whatever we are... they still haven't noticed me. Have my murders stopped them going out? Do they huddle under electric lasers muttering my name? Do they heck as like. The rest of society has stopped but my peers are too drunk on spreadsheets, Guinness, Aftershock and the lap-dancers on Leeson Street to even notice me.

To reach them I need to be postmodern. I need to be ironic. For my fame to be complete I need to be more than a killer - I need to be a phenomenon. I need to be worthy of-

'I WAS A MONSTER!' A TV MOVIE STARRING LEONARDO Dl CAPRIO

Scene Eleven: A montage of newspaper clippings trailing the rise of the Capricorn Killer set to dance music which merges into...

Scene Twelve: Int. A trendy bar in the Temple Bar area of Dublin. The bar is crowded with beautiful people. The Capricorn Killer is standing at the bar, morosely sipping from a glass of whiskey (no ice!) and watching a group of, twenty-somethings. Lots of *NYPD Blue* **camerawork and quick editing to, appeal to the MTV generation**

SARAH, 27, IS CHATTING TO HER FRIENDS.AS WE WATCH HER TALK, A MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC COMES OVER TO HER TABLE AND ASKS HER TO SIGN A BEER-MAT.SHE DOES THIS WITH A GRACIOUS SMILE AND THEN TURNS BACK TO HER FRIENDS.SHE'S TELLING THEM ABOUT HER NEW STORYLINE IN 'GIRLS ABOUT TOWN'. HER FRIENDS ARE NEVER MENTIONED BY NAME BUT GIRL #1 IS ASIAN AND GIRL #2 IS IN A WHEELCHAIR

SARAH : So he's going to be my long-lost brother!

GIRL #1: No way!

SARAH: Yes way! How mad is that! It'll make a change. All I've been doing so far this series is Bridget Jones scenes in bars. They're finally giving me something I can get my teeth into.

GIRL #2 (GUSHES): Well done, Sarah!

(THE OTHERS ALL WISH SARAH WELL)

GIRL #2: So you'll be a genuine celebrity now!

GAY GUY: You could be on that programme!

GIRL #1 (LAUGHING): Everyone's talking about it!

GIRL# 2 : Isn't that *EastEnders?*

SARA LOOKS DISHEARTENED THAT THE CONVERSATION HAS ALREADY MOVED AWAY FRM HER AS THE OTHERS LAUGH. SHE TAKES A SIP FROM HER VODKA. THIS IS THEN INTERCUT WITH A SHOT OF THE CAPRICORN KILLER SIPPING HIS WHISKEY TO EMPHASISE THEIR FUTURE CONNECTION. AT THIS POINT WE NOTICE THAT SARAH IS WEARING A RED TOP SHE IS TO BE A VICTIM!!! VERY THOMAS HARDY!

GAY GUY: Isn't that *Big Brother* contestant going to be on *EastEnders?*

SARAH: Which one? The gay one?

GIRL #2: No. He's on that thing that Ant and Dec used to do.

GIRL #1: What? *Pop Idol?*

GAY **GUY:** I thought they presented *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*

GIRL #1: Yeah, but before that.

S A R A H : Oh, *Popstars?* So they gave us Hear'Say then?

THEY ALL LAUGH A BITTER CONTEMPTUOUS LAUGH! THEY KNOW THEY ARE BETTER THEN A MANUFACTURED BAND!

GIRL #2 : One of them's just married that kid from *EastEnders!*

GIRL #1: What? The one from *Big Brother?*

GIRL #2: No. Wotsisface!

SARAH : So is it Hear'Say that have that 'sexy' song in Big Brother?

THEY ALL START THRUSTING THEIR HIPS AND GROANING 'SEXY!' A LA LIBERTY X.

SARAH: You know who I think is sexy?

GIRL #1: Ant? Brian? Nick? Tony Blackburn? Dec? Mel from *Big Brother?* Mel from *Eastenders?*

THEY ALL LAUGH

SARAH: No! (*SHE LEANS FORWARD, HER HAIR NEARLY CATCHING IN CANDLE FLAME - REMEMBER THIS IS ALL FROM THE CAPRICORN KILLER'S POV!*) The Capricorn Killer!

GIRL #1, GIRL #2, GAY GUY: What???

CAPRICORN KILLER V/O *(THINK EDWARD NORTON IN FIGHT CLUB):* My heart is pounding! I've made it. Finally, someone - someone worthy - is talking about me!

SARAH: It's his eyes!

CAPRICORN KILLER V/O: And I'm starting to realise what I am and what I must do! These people talking have just summed up all there was to Summer 2002. But... but who's going to remember any of this in a few years' time? I can't even remember who won last year's *Big Brother.* The fame that they're talking about is fleeting which means the reality that they've gained is - pure and simple - temporary! And I'm just a footnote at the end of their conversation! I don't want that! If my fame is immortal then my reality will also be immortal. If anyone ever makes a movie of my life then this whole conversation will be incomprehensible because, in a few years time, no one will know who these people were. I don't want

that! I can't be that!

SARAH LEAVES THE BAR AND THE CAPRICORN KILLER FOLLOWS.

CAPRICORN KILLER V/O: And as I watch her enter the nightclub, I realise the two things that I must do. I need to move from B-list to A-list celebrity-vine. To do this I'll have to remove one of the stars and take their place. The second thing I must do is to stop feeling the emotions, to stop seeing this as life and to start seeing it as it is - to start seeing it as everything is - a beautifully directed drama!

Scene Thirteen: Int. A trendy nightclub. The music and lights surround The Capricorn Killer as he enters - emphasising his role as our 'hero'. Just outside the club we hear a church bell chime midnight and so we move on.

Day 33

As I step into the club I feel like I'm entering a film.

The beat of Amber's *Sexual* vibrates across the crowd - each individual lost in their own Ecstasy-fuelled paradise. As sweat pours down their faces, I long to be part of them. My body knows what to do as I unconsciously move my arms into the air. My legs are fluid, moving up and down and back and forth to the beat of the tune. We all brush against each other, aware of the presence of these beautiful others but not recognising them as people. As a silent group, we move as one. And there she is. Sarah, a celebrity. Someone else important. Her long blonde hair drenched with sweat, she appears as if she'll never leave her world. The smile on her face is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Suddenly, the tune changes, an energetic, screaming, staccato tune, electronic and yet pure, flies over our heads in perfect harmony with pulsing green lasers. As one, we explode. Every individual screams into action, our arms punching out and high - our fingers slicing through the lasers. Our smiles grow wider as we understand.

I move through these others and towards the blonde girl with the beautiful smile. She stares into my eyes and invites me to share in her world. Rhythmically, she creates a space for me and our actions

become one. Our euphoric ecstasy flows like waves across those nearest to us as they understand that two kindred souls have, at last, found each other.

Although we don't touch each other, mentally we are as one. The screaming, staccato tune sounds once more and we fly. Her black, flowing top flaps at an impossible speed as she violently shakes her body from side to side. She looks into my eyes, begging me, pleading with me to join her physically as well as mentally. I move towards her, her face now lit purely by the pulsing green lasers. I reach out and my hand holds the back of her neck - electric. She begs me once more with her eyes and my lips move towards hers. Flash of green.

'Now,' she whispers.

My mouth moves from hers and towards her neck. Flash of green. She makes no sound as my teeth pierce her porcelain white - flash of green - neck. Her warm blood - red, black under the green - flows into my greedy mouth and I feed. Her life becomes mine as I drink and drink. Flash of green. She stops moving and I finish. I lay her beautiful, life- giving body down next to a discarded water bottle and, with one last glance at her unending eternal smile, I begin to slide rhythmically once more through the beautiful people.

As I leave the dance floor, someone violently interrupts our paradise with a scream. The atmosphere disappears as the individuals return from their heavens. Their beauty disappears, their clothes become cheap and the music stops. I ignore them all and push through the main doors into the biting cold wind as the screams intensify.

Day 35

And the papers have a field day. 'TV DRAMA STAR LATEST VICTIM OF SERIAL KILLER!'

It's happened! I'M THERE!

Day 36 in the Big Brother House

And I'm in a pub that looks like Pizza Hut with a bar... I WEAR MY SUNGLASSES AT NIGHT!

Day 38 (SCENE 433:A NIGHTCLUB)

SMILING. CAN'T STOP SMILING LIFE SO HAPPY. LOVE. LOVE LIFE. BEAT GETTING FASTER. CAN'T STOP MOVING. NOW JUST HARMONY. NO BEAT. MELODY. STOP MOVING SMILE TO THE SKY. ALL STAND STILL. BEAUTIFUL. NEVER BEEN SUCH HARMONY IN ALL HISTORY. WANT TO KISS EVERYONE. THEY WANT TO KISS ME. BREATHE IN. BREATHE OUT.

AND THE VOICE STARTS. TELLING US HE IS GOD. HE SPEAKS OVER THE MUSIC AND WE LISTEN. AND HE STOPS. AND THE DRUMS START. POUNDING DRUMS. BEATING DRUMS. AND WE DANCE!

And that night I have a dream but it ain't no John Lennon fluffy-bunny, cotton-wool dream:

And I'm flying. Flying high above all their little soap-opera stories of unplanned pregnancies and long-lost brothers. And there's a girl and she's pointing at me. 'What's that?' she asks the angel. 'Can't you see it? Coming towards us!' She doesn't know what I am. She doesn't know where she is but I do. A place where God and music and reality and dreams are swirling around in a maelstrom of confusion and unreality. I let my self fall away from them and suddenly - suddenly I hear the audience clapping and laughing. And I can see them! Amongst the thousands of grinning faces with staring eyes, I can see Mummy and Daddy. Their faces are distorted as they eat buttered crumpets and applaud the events they 're watching. I try to fly towards them. Try to be with them once more but there's something between us. I'm trapped in a glass cage! And as the laughter - the unstopping, mocking laughter - continues I hammer on the glass. Won't Mummy and Daddy rescue me? Can't anyone save me? And in my panic I turn the world into what I want it to be. The towers are crashing down over and over again - the images that will be forever real and never forgotten. And I'm trapped here in the glass cage and I'm hammering on the glass but Mummy reaches towards me and switches over and I wake up.

Day 44

and my skin smells like freshly baked bread. Homely. As I sit there, wrapped tightly in the dressing-gown Mummy got me last Christmas, I realise something. Sitting here in the semi-DARKness, I realise I am me. There will never be another me. I will never have another chance at LIFE. Every breath I take, every thought I make - each one is unique to me. There are millions and millions of individuals in this world. I always used to hate it when someone DIED and someone else would say 'Makes you think, doesn't it. Could have been you or me!' Yeah, but what about the poor sod who's died? Their memories and thoughts are all gone for ever. Their consciousness has been switched off, SHUTDOWN. They can leave their belongings, their photos, toiletries and clothes but who really knows what was happening in their mind? Who really knows who they were? And now, they're gone. That person, that individual is gone. Only to be remembered in photos, fading memories and on websites. But what were they thinking as they last ran that hair gel through their hair? Were they thinking about shopping, dinner, sex, a film, *Big Brother,* their career, killing, life, death, babies...? We'll never know.

I need the FAME. I know I'll be gone soon. My Saviour will arrive and take me from this path. Well, I say bring on the Fenyman. COME AND GET ME! Just let me leave my mark on the world first. The dream showed me my innermost desire. I want - no, I need - to be 9/11 not *Big Brother.* I want to... I don't know what I want but I want something! What do I want? I ask the eyes.

Day 46

And on the bus, a group ofnoisy clubbers LAUGH. Their shrill giggling piercing my mind, I turn with a friendly grin and the blood flows.

Day 49

iS ThiS reAl??

Day 50

i take the eyes off the wall cos i is sick of em staring at me everyone is staring at me

i don't understand what everyone wants none of it is real any more

they are all fake

Day 52

Sober again. But was it ever real? Was any ofit? Even when I used to work in the office - it's like I was pretending. I didn't really have the high powered job in THE CITY - I was acting. The office workers - the suited angels in the clubs ofDublin - weren't really office workers - they'd just seen all the TV dramas telling them how office workers were supposed to act. We're part of the 'work hard, play hard' generation so that's how we must act. And 'act' is the right word. Because it's all an act. And we all try to make it real! I'm starting to understand now. We praise a TV drama if it's gritty and realistic and rappers are singing about life on the streets and keeping it real and we all have endless phone numbers and email addresses as if we are trying to emphasise that we are real and that we are here and we all want to be famous because none of its real any more.

TO MAKE OURSELVES FEEL REAL WE HAVE TO ACT LIKE THEY TELL US! BUT IT'S NOT ENOUGH! WELL, I WON'T DO IT ANY MORE! I'M GOING TO... I'M GOING TO... I'M...

drunk. I am lost. I am in the club. I am lost *(...defining characteristic...).* Mummy and Daddy didn't come looking for me on the other side of the screen. I think they were real.

BANG a drum sounds. The light flashes. They all smiling false smiles. They not real as they not on TV. I will make them real. I will give them fame. I will bring them to my side of the glass .And then -

THE MUSIC... THE MUSIC GETS HIGHER AND HIGHER. THE STACCATO, PULSING RHYTHM NOW A HIGH-PITCHED SCREECH.

THE EXTRAS ARE GRINNING MANICALLY AND DANCING FRANTICALLY.

But still they talk. Endless talk of cappuccinos and Beckham and *Big Brother* and manufactured bands but THEY are all manufactured. I'm on the right side of the screen and I will bring them to reality. I will -

BANG - A DRUM SOUNDS. THE CRIMSON LIGHT FLASHES. SMILING FALSE SMILES.

They're yearning to be with me, to be part of it. I will make them real! Together we'll all be immortal!

BANG - A DRUM SOUNDS. THE CRIMSON LIGHT FLASHES. SMILING FALSE SMILES.

But before I can, everything goes

DARK
BANG
RED LIGHT
I SEE DEAD PEOPLE
DARK
BANG
LIGHT
THE HUNDREDS OF FACES OF MY VICTIMS-TO-BE STARING OUT OF THE FRONT PAGES
DARK
BANG
LIGHT
WE'LL ALL BE REAL!
DARK
BANG
LIGHT
NOT *BIG BROTHER* REAL! NOT FAKE CELEBRITY REAL!
WE'RE TALKING WASHINGTON SNIPER REAL! IT'S ALL THERE - IN THE GLASS CAGE!
DARK BANG LIGHT GRINS FASTER FASTER IMPOSSIBLE
PANIC PANIC PANIC PANIC ABOUT TO EXPLODE

DARKBANGLIGHT TEETH DARKBANGLIGHT CAMERAS DARKBANGLIGHT ACTION DARKBANGLIGHT HUNGER DARKBANGLIGHT STROBE FASTER FASTER HEART POUNDS MUST DARKBANGLIGHT DARKBANGLIGHT DANCE MUST DARKBANGLIGHT FEED.
MUST FEED! AND MY ARMS ARE RAISING ABOVE MY HEAD AND THE SHRIEK IS STARTING TO BUILD UP INSIDE OF ME AND THE MUSIC AND THE LIGHTS AND I'M ABOUT TO STRIKE WHEN

she appears

In an electric-blue halo, she stands. My angel!

'Come with me!' she mouths silently as the music returns and the crowds go wild. My breathing returns to normal and the sweat begins to cool.

I feel calm as I approach her. She is beautiful. Really beautiful. Small, she should be helpless but it's as if she is controlling the crowd with her smile as they part like the Red Sea and they let me through. The violins start to play as I reach her and I look down at my Saviour.

And she speaks 'Come with me?' she asks - no commands! - with a cultured, unraised voice. I feel all my fame, my reality evaporate away as I follow her through a door I never knew existed.

As we walk down a grey, featureless corridor I ask her her name. 'Romana,' she replies.

Romana. Not Mel or Tracey or Kylie or any of those other real media names - it's different. Unique. Unreal. But is she real?

She doesn't ask me my name but tells me she will help me. I follow her as she glides down the bland corridor and then she stops and turns to me. She looks up at me and says:

'I know what you are.'

SHE KNOWS WHAT I AM! I don't know what I am but she does!

‘Am I real?’ I ask her.

‘Are any of us?’

I look at her. She doesn’t look real. Her clothes, her hair, her features… they don’t… they don’t… there’s something… she isn’t behaving like anyone else! She doesn’t look the same! She isn’t a reflection of what’s on the telly.

She isn’t trying to be real.

And then HE appears. A real devil. Tall, dressed entirely in red and carrying a long walking-stick. He smiles, revealing thousands of teeth. ‘Hello,’ he says calmly.

‘What am I?’

‘Ah, well, this could be rather awkward,’ he says, acting shy. ‘You see

I interrupt him. ‘This isn’t real!’

He smiles at me. ‘Well of course it isn’t. You think we don’t know what we are? We know what we are, don’t we Romana?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’ she replies.

‘Yes Doctor!’ he shouts back before looking at me. ‘Why are you doing it?’

I reply. ‘They’re all trying to act real! Trying to act like they’re on the other side of the screen! But they’re not and I am! I’m trapped here and I want to give them all what they want! I am real now. I am famous! I want them to be with me!’

My voice is rising as I start to panic once more. I don’t understand what these two are. They’re not trying to be real. They’re not old or young or cool or uncool. They’re not lawyers or the police or hospital workers. They’re unique and original and I don’t

understand what they are!

The panic in me intensifies and I run at the man He trips me easily, too easily and I fall the unending fall to the concrete.

He stands over me, tall and blocking the light. He looks down at me and smiles a toothy grin that screams out confidence, arrogance and self- belief. The jealousy bites into me as I yearn for that belief in myself.

I can still hear the music but the beat has stopped. Mourning violins wail a sad tune.

He raises the walking stick above my chest.

'You said you could help me?' I plead.

'I'm afraid someone brought you into our world. This is the only help we can give you,' he replies. 'Now hold still. This won't hurt a bit.'

('The Capricorn Killer; please leave the Big Brother House')

He plunges the stick through my chest and with the sound of smashing glass my ribs implode. He lied about it not hurting. But I suppose he had to, for the cameras. A tear rolls down my cheek. By the time it reaches my chin, my body has dissolved into ash. I am no longer real or unreal. I just am. And as the man starts to walk away, I feel myself rising into the air and then through into the wall. As he strides away, he shouts at Romana without looking back.

'I'm hungry, Romana. Are you hungry?'

She calls back, 'Famished, Doctor.'

'Fancy a steak? I know this wonderful little restaurant... '

And his voice trails off as he strides down the corridor, his work done. Romana starts to chase after him but then stops and turns to

the pile of dust. The expression on her face changes and her widening eyes suddenly express raw emotion.

‘Sorry,’ she whispers before chasing after my killer.

And as I stare through the grey, glass wall I think of my Mummy. The mad music begins to play and the credits begin to roll and I, I am listed as ‘Monster’. No name. No recognition. Was I ever real? Will I be remembered? A tear would fall if

Short Trips: Companions

After the slot-allocation disaster of *Zodiac*, a rather more woolly theme seemed a good idea for the next collection. Of course, things still weren't plain sailing, as the word-count was increased at the last moment and a desperate scramble for extra stories resulted. Oh well. Maybe next time things would go right...

Now, in a book compiled from scratch, this story and Joe's *Zodiac* offering would undoubtedly be placed quite far apart, as this is another that plays with form and utilises all the advantages of the short story. But let's look at having two doses of remarkable inventiveness so close together as a blessing, not a curse. This is Ian Potter's *Apocrypha Bipedium*: as with all Ian's stories it's funny, clever, and repays multiple readings - and features a healthy dose of fan- pleasing features, in this case the Doctor catching up with a past companion.

Jacqueline Rayner

Apocrypha Bipedium
Ian Potter

A Suggestive Correlation of The Cressida Manuscripts with other Anomalous Texts of the Pre-Animarian Era as proposed for Collective Consideration by Historiographic Speculator Anctloddoton.

In my selection and placement of the following extracts from the literature of the extinct worlds, I have attempted to draw suggestive parallels between some of the Problem Texts of the humanoid cultures. Obviously, the records of those times are now so fragmentary that any conclusions we draw from the surviving evidence must remain speculative. We cannot know what evidence we are missing, thus the linking of events posited by the presentation of these documents must remain a tentative hypothesis at best.

HS A

From *The Primary Cressida Document - Suppressed Texts of the Vatican Library, A Mysteria Press Original,* 2973 CE.

The past is another country, the Doctor used to say. By which I suppose he meant it's a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and you can have real problems with customs when you arrive.

I grew up in the future myself, which makes living in the past tricky at times. Liverpool *was* a great place to grow up if you were into the past though. It was full of it; the Campus Manor theme park, the castle, the Beatles Memorial Theatre, The Saint Francis of Fazakerley Museum, the Carl Jung Dream Tour, Post-Industrial Land and all those cathedrals, you were tripping over history everywhere. Mummy's parents came from there too, so it was practically like we knew real- life olden days people.

It was much better than Liddell Towers where we lived in New

London - most of the history near there seemed to be about some silly girl who'd let a professor of sums take photos of her and fell down a rabbit hole, or about those awful Daleks wiping out Southern England with mines and things. Much duller and hardly any variety in the rides at all.

Here in the actual olden days there's not much past anywhere, just loads of future, and the rides are even less fun, all carts and donkeys and hardly any roads. We're moving again, you see, dear diary. Even though the conquering Greeks don't really seem to want to colonise any of Asia Minor themselves they don't seem to want any Trojans settling back down anywhere round here either. They've occupied what's left of the city, I suspect mainly so Menelaus can find all the expensive bits of Helen's jewellery she seems to have mislaid, and seem keen we don't hang about too nearby. Mymiddon Hoplites apologetically move us on now and again, clearly wondering when they can decently be allowed back home to start fighting amongst themselves again, and so we pack up and move. Some of their chaps are still feeling rather tetchy for no good reason apparently. Troilus says there's a silly rumour going around that some terrible woman, probably a goddess, went around whipping up aggression amongst the Greeks a few years ago by magic, leaving marks on their necks that mean they can't calm down!

It doesn't make any sense to me. I think I might just be getting the cleaned up version of a soldier's tale actually. I think that happens with me a lot. People treat me like a silly little girl sometimes, which isn't really fair when I come from the future and know all sorts ofthings they don't. I'm an adult now, even ifnot being born yet does make me about minus four thousand officially.

I don't think Agamemnon's Greeks really know what to do now to be honest, and after a decade's anticipation I don't think the trade routes or the princess they were sacking Troy to get are quite as good as they were hoping. I think they're just hanging around stopping us settling down and looking for lost costume jewellery until they can think of something better to do. Some of the Ithacans are moaning it'll be another decade before any of them get home at this rate. Bless them.

Running out ofroom, dear diary. Will write more when I have some new goats' hides.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It! The True Confessions of a Ka Faraq Gatri not just written for the money when trapped on a primitive planet and needing cash to buy parts by* 'Snail', *Boxwood Books, 300 AGB.*

Of course the hairy kangaroo had been at the mind rubbers and didn't even realise the sword was there! How we laughed. Terrible name- dropper, Zodin, but worth her weight in souffle all the same.

Naturally enough, mention of name-dropping reminds me of another anecdote, this one relating to dear old Bill Shakespeare, one of the finest writers and most atrocious spellers of any age. I've met him several times now and hope to again if I ever get off this pre-warp- engineering dustball. The last time was during that sticky business with poor Kitty Marlowe and those Psionovores from Neddy Kelley's old scrying glass that I related in Chapter 9, but perhaps our most awkward misadventure together was the time I introduced him to some of his own characters, who included, as it happened, a dear, dear friend of mine.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress* by Charlotte Elspeth Bollard, Library of Kar-Charrat. The work, having suffered some worm damage in the Great 2107 AD Cock Up, is presented here in the Elgin decorruption.

Travelling with Wilf and the Doctor was a curious experienced already felt somewhat out of sorts with time, having discovered my very existence was making history split in two, but sharing a home with a boy from the 16th Century and a man who seemed to come from nowhere so much as his own imagination, merely heightened my feeling that I no longer belonged to any era.

We three fellow time travellers had so very little in common beyond having all read the plays the boy had not yet written that the small talk had been small indeed, and, after a few days of the Doctor failing to get Wilf home, the atmosphere had become a little tense.

Wilf, it further transpired, had difficulty reading anything written in more modern Anglish than his own, which meant there had been little of a literary nature to distract him during his sojourn with us once he had read and re-read the Doctor's picture books about Frinchs, Sneetches, Ooblecks and Cats in Hams.

Thankfully, towards the end of Wilfs stay with us the Doctor had discovered a futuristic version of Lido called Peter Pan Pop-O-Matic Frustration that we could enjoy playing together and those last long hibiscus-scented afternoons in his music room passed pleasantly enough, without young Wilf having to constantly relate the escapades of besocked foxes to us.

The Doctor always won our games, usually coming from behind implausibly late in the day, and nearly always using some devious subterfuge to gain victory. Indeed, it was observing the childlike joy on the Doctor's face at his underhand triumphs on the Peter Pan Pop-O- Matic Frustration board that I first realised just how much of Peter there was in his nature. Naturally, we loved him enough to pretend not to notice his cheating (I sometimes think the whole universe did) and at times towards the end we three had so much fun that I almost forgot I was a paradox, unpicking creation like Penelope at her tapestry in the heroic age we had just left.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur - works attributed to William Shakespeare* collated by Heinrich Von Berlitz and Leopold Kettlecamp, *Ampersand and Ampersand,* 85 AH.

This passage from *The Noble Troyan Woman ofTroy* - fragmentary foul papers of a naive work once attributed to the very young Shackspur, is worth quoting in full.

Act 2, Scene 1. A room within the box. EnterMistress Charley, Doctor Shallow and Young Will.

Doct. Here at last! Our journey finally through.
In fifteen hundred and seventy two.
Young Will, regard the ceiling viewing dome -
Stratford on Avon, the Hathaway home.

Will. But sir, on those bare hills, no swarths do roll.
And no houses nestle ‘twixt those craggy knolls -
The sun burns with a fierce un-English light
And that beach there is not a Warwick sight!
That’s not Stratford displayed above us

Char. - Lest the Avon’s turn’d to sea, ‘Od love us!

Many scholars have disputed the authenticity of this piece of alleged Shackspurian juvenilia, pointing out, fairly, that it does appear to be the only one of his extant works that the Bard biroed in a twentieth-century school jotter otherwise festooned in swirly ink blots and doodled hexagons. However, if Shackspur did travel in Time, as several scholars suggest, this objection falls away. A more compelling argument for its inauthenticity is the verse style, experimenting uniquely within the Shackspurian canon with strict iambic pentameter composed entirely in rhyming couplets. Whilst dreadful, it is nothing like as appalling as that in Shackspur’s earliest known adult writing.

* * *

From *Tales from the Matrix - True Stories from TARDIS Logs Retoldfor Time Tots* by Loom Auntie Flavia, *Panopticon Press,* 6803. 8 Rassilon Era. Part of the Wigner Heisenberg Collection, The Mobile Library, Talking Books Section. Location currently uncertain.

The Doctor flicked the temporal stabiliser off and pulled down the transitional element control rod taking him out of the V ortex. Quite the wrong way to actualise and quadro-anchor even a Type 40 Time Capsule, isn’t it? Exiting the interstitial continuum at the perihelion of a temporal ellipse can cause serious buffering in your harmonic wave packet transference and sever your main fluid links, can’t it?

‘Here we are, Stratford on Avon, 1572!’ announced the Doctor proudly and wrongly. If he’d ever bothered to use his Absolute Tesseractulator to pinpoint his dimensional locations he wouldn’t have made these kind of mistakes, of course, but the Tesseractulator

had never come out of its box, had it?

Charlotte Pollard, the Doctor's friend, came over to him and flicked on the ceiling scanner.

A friend's an Earth thing. It's a bit like having a colleague or fellow student you co-operate with, but without any exams or project targets at the end to make the co-operation meaningful. There was a fashion for having them on Gallifrey at one time, ask some of your older cousins about it, they might remember.

Charlotte squinted at the view outside. It didn't look like the Stratford she'd visited, with neither alien enslavers nor half timbered tea shops anywhere in sight. 'Are you sure?' she asked.

'Positive. Ish,' replied the Doctor. William Shaxsberd, a young man they'd promised to drop off in 1572, put down his coloured crayons and came to join them.

'It does not look much as it once did, Doctor,' said William, looking at the ceiling and cricking his neck.

The Doctor followed suit. The dustbowl outside was certainly not Warwickshire in any era he'd visited, 'No. Indeed not,' he admitted. 'I think the rift in the Vortex is introducing a random element into my calculations.'

Do you remember the rift in the Vortex, from last time? That's right, the Doctor made that too! It was due to the paradoxical interaction of two paravertical chronostreams further complicated by three retro- temporal augmented causal feedback loops, wasn't it?

'Another random element?' asked Charlotte, 'More random than the way you play "eeny meeny miney mo" with the buttons?'

'Ha, Charley,' said the Doctor. 'Tres amusent.'

Charlotte turned to William to explain, 'That's French, Will, for "I've been banged to rights, Miss Pollard",' she said.

‘I somehow knew,’ William replied.

‘Really?’ asked Charlotte. ‘How?’

‘It’s a Time Lord gift, Charley,’ said the Doctor, ‘and yes it would be awfully de trop to ask how it works.’ Or at least that’s what Charlotte thought he said. William heard something quite different of course.

‘Well, let’s get out there then,’ said the Doctor, opening the doors without taking any proper readings.

‘Er, why?’ asked Charlotte.

‘Because until we know how far out the rift has shunted us in space and time we won’t know how to get to Stratford, 15 diddlydiddly...’ explained the Doctor, waving his hand vaguely as he searched his memory for the end of the four digit number he’d lost interest in.

‘Seventy-two,’ prompted William.

‘The very same.’ The Doctor beamed, ruffling the young man’s hair in a way that, thanks to the TARDIS telepathic circuits alone, seemed endearing rather than insufferable and over familiar.

William and the Doctor headed for the doors. Charlotte was troubled though.

‘Won’t my temporal instability cause untold problems to wherever we are?’ she asked, quite sensibly, all things considered.

‘Oh, very probably, I expect,’ replied the Doctor airily, ‘but if you spent your whole life worrying about the consequences of your actions you’d never get anything done and the consequences of that would be unthinkable, wouldn’t they? Faint heart never bowled a maiden over, you know.’

Charlotte scowled. ‘Mind,’ added the Doctor as he stepped out of the control room, ‘neither did Katie “the Beast” Davies, if I

remember my 22nd-century Wisden correctly.'

That was an allusion to the Earth game Cricket, wasn't it? It was the Earth's planetary sport, despite the fact that humans were the worst players of it in the galaxy if you remember.

'Doctor, I find your words confusing,' said William as he followed him out.

'It's a Time Lord gift, Will,' Charlotte whispered. 'You'll get used to it.'

* * *

From *The Primary Cressida document*

New hides! This keeping a journal business is awfully tricky when you've no paper around, but before mummy died, she did make me promise I'd write one when I eventually settled down. It's a family tradition that's been handed down for generations apparently, not that I ever saw mummy's.

Anyhow, Troilus is still very eager to settle soon, but where? I've ruled out going east to the Holy Land because from what I remember from history and my travels we'll get no peace there and the rest of the Med and Adriatic has already been bagsied. Troilus reckons Aeneas will have already have set up somewhere by now and we should have gone off on his boat when we had the chance. I just nod, and try to explain wave particle duality to the little ones.

I have a vague feeling I learned something about Aeneas from the UK-201's didactomat box way back in the future. I think he ended up with Dido in Carthage for a bit, which confuses me because I thought Dido's music was Late Classical, which must be after this period, surely. I'm sketchy on the details to be honest. I only remember it was Dido and not Sister Bliss because the planet we crashed into on the way to Astra was named after her.

Funny thinking about Dido, that was the place I've called home longest in recent years. I've been a nomad a while really - split

between London and Liverpool as a girl, never knowing whether to talk posh and southern or not, emigrating to off-Earth with daddy, hopping about through Time with the Doctor, and now traipsing around Turkey with Troilus and his mates before its even called that or has any tourist facilities to speak of. I think I must have ‘space travel in my blood’ as one ofthose Baroque composers put it!

I’ve been wondering when I should discover electricity and plumbing a bit recently, these fleeces don’t clean themselves like proper clothes, so the sooner we can invent the twin tub the better. Are we before or after that Monk who invented things too early here, I wonder? I don’t want to mess things up like he did, but I’m shocking on dates. I just paid attention to the stories in the history books really, not the order they happened in. If I’d known the way round history went was going to be important I would have had the machine teach me it. Of course, as a child you never expect all that history around you is going to run away into the future like it has, do you?

I’ve decided I’ll probably start with a steam engine and see if that messes up my memory of the future. The way I see it, it’ll be impossible for me to invent anything that’ll stop me being born so I can’t do too much harm.

I casually suggested making things out of iron the other day, which I know is a big step forward but everyone just laughed. Too brittle and hard to work compared to bronze or tin, they said. I suppose they’re right. You have to do something to it to make it strong, I remember that. I just don’t remember what that something is. For all I know my quad physics equations and could still compose a cogent analygraph for the fall of the Mallatratt Protectorate, I’m a bit rusty on a few of the basics. Going to take us years to get garlic bread and sound radio at this rate.

Of course, I had a bit of training for life without the mod cons on Dido, so I can cope, but what makes things really fiddly at the moment is that my future’s past is catching up with my present, which is complicated enough to write down, let alone experience.

We’ve just bumped into the Doctor as a young man, and I’m sure

it's really bad form for me to let on I recognise him when as far as he's concerned he's not met me yet.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

My plan was pretty much the usual one, to go out and see if we could find out the year and our whereabouts in a way that wouldn't arouse any suspicions, and then hang around until nightfall to get a better fix from the position of the stars. It may sound dull but I've found if I do that I usually find something or other to get embroiled in before sunset.

We stepped circumspectly out of the Ship and set offin search of the nearest habitation, ready as ever to improvise any number of cover stories to explain our presence and strange garb. As luck would have it we soon ran into one of the locals, and were able to subtly winkle out the info we needed on route to his encampment.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

People say you should never look back of course, advice we've been ignoring since Orpheus and EuroDisney, but I can't help thinking that if the Doctor hadn't landed us in the aftermath of the Trajan War a lot of that beastly business with the Time Lords might have been avoided later.

As usual the Doctor rejoiced in dropping straight into the middle of things without a moment's forethought. Impossible, exasperating man, I tried to protest but somehow he just brushed my complaints away with a smiled shouldn't have let him, but he did have such a lovely smile.

* * *

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 3, Scene 2. Another part of the hillside. Enter Mistress Charley, Doctor Shallow and Young Will.

Doct. Yoohoo! Mister Goatboy, excuse me please, Could you tell me what time and place is this?

Char. Discreet as ever.

Enter a Goatherd.

Doct. Yes, but awfully brave.
Young man, there is information we crave.
What land is this and what year are we in?
We've lost track of both in our travelling.

Char. Oh I give up, you're so inconsistent.

Doct. Just smile prettily, act like an assistant.

Char. But I never know what trick you'll pull next!

Doct. Just grit your teeth, smile and stick out your chest; Magic's best tricks work by misdirection.

Char. So I'm just here to stir his -

Will. Affection?

Doct. Quite so Will, a pretty face inspires trust.
True, I'm afraid, if not awfully just.
This chap will tell us the time and the place
And Presto well head straight back into Space!

Goat. Eleven eight three BC is the year
This is Hisarlik in Anatolia.
I expect you're traders from Phoenicia
To be garbed and garbling here so queer.
You've been ship wreck'd and concuss'd I'll be bound.
Which'll be why you have no goods around.
We must offer you shelter at the least
Pop back home with me and well have a feast.

Char. How can he know he lives before Our Lord?

Doct. It's just a translation device that's flaw'd.
It's an awfully clever mechanism
But it causes the odd anachronism.
Kind goatherd, we would love to share a meal
And watch the evening stars above us wheel.
For by such means we will precisely know
Our station now and where we next must go.

Exeunt Omnes.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

'Do we really need to do this?' asked Charlotte as the band trudged wearily after the herdsman in their impractical shoes, 'Surely the date and location he's given you is enough?'

'Perhaps,' the Doctor replied, 'but studying the stars will allow me to be more accurate. Besides, I'm famished. We haven't eaten for minus three thousand years, bear in mind.'

So the Doctor and his companions blithely headed off into further temporal confusion, unaware that the goatherd had seen the TARDIS arrive and knew full well who the Doctor was already.

There's a lesson there for anyone who thinks it's clever to keep their TARDIS in one form, don't you think? The Ionic Column factory preset might look nice, for example, but when using it means every Grun, Za and Caius in the Cosmos knows who you are immediately, it rather defeats the point of a chameleon circuit.

From *The Primary Cressida document*

One of our herdsmen saw the TARDIS arrive in the next valley this afternoon and instantly recognised it as the mobile temple that had prefigured the city's fall, and the Doctor as a younger version of the old man from my tales.

He sent his mate back to tell us so we all had time to prepare

ourselves and could all pretend we believed the Doctor's implausible story about being a trader from Phoenicia when he turned up an hour or so later.

It's definitely him, probably about 40 years before we met. He dresses similarly, his hair is curlier and darker and his face looks a bit different, but the years are never kind, are they? Amazingly, he's almost as vague as a young man as he was when old, if not quite so ummy and erry. I'd always assumed that was because he was getting on a bit.

Thankfully, no one here's too thrown by the idea of time travellers after me relating all my adventures to them, though one of the boys did ask me why the Doctor didn't walk and talk backwards when his past was in the future. I was very clear why not when I started explaining it, but I must admit I got a bit confused as I went along.

He hasn't recognised me of course, dear diary, and we've invited him and his friends to have tea tonight.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

Well, imagine my embarrassment when we arrived at the fellow's encampment and who was in charge but my old friend Vicki (now calling herself Cressida of course) and her new husband Troilus, who I'd never actually met, due to quite heavy escaping commitments around the time they got together.

I realised with a start that young Bill Shakespeare was due to write a play about this couple in a few years, and that unless I was careful this meeting would almost certainly be what inspired it, thus complicating Bill's already tortuous history further and bringing yet another new paradox to mine. I'd only let Vicki go away with Troilus at Troy's fall because once I heard she was calling herself Cressida I'd assumed it was predestined (well, I was young, I believed in that kind of thing), I knew there was a play about the couple by Shakespeare and thought I was helping history take its course by hitching them up. Now, if I'd only done that because my future actions would one day bring that play about, I'd accidentally made a big chunk of my past dependent on my future, which, as

you know, isn't really the accepted way of going about things.

I reasoned it was vital for the tidiness of the time line that I kept Bill from learning the background of Troilus and Cressida in any detail, ideally forgetting as much of their present as he could too.

To complicate matters further, Vicki had actually seen Bill as an adult on my time telly, the Time Space Visualiser. She was never the most historically careful of girls, and I feared that if she found out who he was, she'd probably tell him all about his future at the court of Elizabeth and getting the commission to write *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the inspiration for *Hamlet* on the same day and how he'd sprained his wrist in his rush to write both.

All it might take, I thought, would be one slip from any one of us, accidentally mentioning the words TARDIS or Zeus Plug over dessert, say, and causality would be tangled up like President Pandak's kittens in twine, quicker than you could explain what you pop in a Ganymede socket.

Luckily, it seemed Vicki hadn't spotted how anachronistic our garb was and hadn't realised I was her old friend, seeming to completely swallow my inventive tales of sea faring, despite Charley's rather fanciful insertions about hook-handed pirates.

I had, of course, underestimated her, as a quick and entirely accidental glance at her diary before dinner proved. Not knowing I could regenerate, she had taken me for my young self in my first form and thought she was protecting me from foreknowledge!

This, of course, suited my purpose. All I reckoned I had to do now to save Time from chewing itself to bits was keep Will busy and make sure Vicki didn't relate her history to any of us over dinner.

Oh what tangled webs we weave, when tidy temporal strands we try to leave.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

Mr and Mrs Troilus seemed a sweet couple, he a lanky chap with a

curly beard and a well-meaning expression and she a rather enthusiastic young thing with big eyes, yet the Doctor had become rather shifty from the moment we met them. I knew he was preoccupied by something, but I had, at that time, no idea what. After some fun, improvising tales of derring-do on the high seas to prove our credentials as traders, he took me to one side and explained that I had to get Wilf as squiffy as possible at the feast that night for reasons it was simpler at that moment not to explain. He said history depended on me getting the boy so drunk he could neither speak nor remember his behaviour the next morning. I'm normally quite good at that kind of thing, it was hardly my fault the Bawd was a functioning alcoholic at the age of eight.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 4, Scene 1. An encampment in the mountains. Enter Mistress Charley, Doctor Shallow, Young Will, a goatherd, Troilus, Cressida, divers villagers and guards severally.

Doct. Hello. *(Aside)* Her! 'Tis Vicki, I should have guess'd.
I never with good geography was bless'd
Hisarlik is the modern name for Troy.
Quite a temporal tangle, boy oh boy!
(To *Cress.)* Ha ha, my hearties! We here are sailors three. *(Aside)* I can but hope she does not see 'tis me.

Cress. *(Aside)* Deceit upon deception!
Can this be The Doctor who I first took it to be?
Is this him when young as I assumed?
Or must deeper deceit be presumed?
I'll play along until the truth I know.
(ToDoct.) Good mariners, welcome and hello.

Will. *(To Char.*) What's this strange accented charade about?

Char. *(To Will)* Who knows, we'll be, I bet, last to find out.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

Yes Time Tots, exactly! The first thing any of us would have done would have been to get out of there quickly before we compromised the causal nexus. Staying for tea and imbibing too much ethanol, which you'll recall the Doctor had a particular weakness for on his mother's side, doesn't strike any of us as sensible!

From *The Secondary Cressida document* (a transcribed fragment allegedly found at a Church of Rome jumble sale) - *Even More Suppressed Texts of the Vatican Library,* A Hatper-Mysteria-Ellerycorp Press Original, 2977 CE

My ruse worked, the robot's read my carefully exposed diary and thinks I suspect nothing! He's so obviously not really the Doctor it's not true, but he doesn't know I know that yet, so we have the advantage. He's definitely a Dalek robot double like that other one they sent after us.

They've probably made him the young Doctor this time to make it less obvious. He does look a bit like he could be him sometimes if you're not paying attention, but ifyou look closely his face is all wrong and his voice goes a bit funny sometimes like that other robot's did, almost doing my accent at times! I think he's probably feeding on myjumbled memories or something.

We'll overpower him and his companions at dinner tonight and destroy them, they won't expect me to know how to deactivate them.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

I've always been keen on wine, particularly the heavier oaky reds, though I find there is a rather tiresome tendency for them to be drugged by villainous blackguards sometimes, rather impairing the subtleties of the flavour, but wine in the Homeric era was quite a different proposition. What can I tell you about it except that it tasted awful but did the job?

It wasn't the heavily resinated stuff the Greeks later went in for, thankfully, nor indeed that watered-down muck the ancient Romans

used to dish out at parties, but I think it's telling that the most flattering thing Homer had to say about it in the whole of *The Iliad* was how like the sea it was in hue. When you bear in mind he was blind, you can tell he'd had to ask around a bit to find anyone with something positive to say about it.

The food wasn't much better either. It can be terribly hard eating out when you travel like I do. These days at home, I generally try to eat only things that don't have a central nervous system, or that I've knocked up in the food machine, but sometimes, when you're a guest, qualms like that have to go out of the window, particularly on worlds ruled by intelligent plants, where you're best advised not to ask for a celery stick and to just stick your toes in damp soil like everyone else at the table.

Even then I try to stick to my principles and not eat anything with a sense of self, parliamentary democracy or sultanas in it.

This dinner was a particularly awkward affair; Charley acting like a slightly sloshed pirate queen, Vicki acting like she didn't know me, Bill acting up, singing lewd madrigals that officially weren't due for invention yet in his rather reedy girlish voice, and all the while me worrying about causality falling apart around me rather too much to fully enjoy the dolmades.

Suddenly, half way through the proceedings, the impossible happened: it took a turn for the worse. Vicki shouted out 'Now!', lunged at my chest and started tearing at my waistcoat.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

My recollections of the ensuing events are somewhat hazy; I had been struggling to match young Wilt measure for measure, you might say, when I saw the Doctor being attacked. I launched myself at his assailant and missed, I'm told, briefly losing my dignity and consciousness in the process.

A shocking melee ensued by all accounts, with Trajans tearing at our clothes with cutlery and all the usual business with tables being turned and the like breaking out; I'm only glad I can't remember the

full details, because what little I do makes me blush quite enough.

It's quite possible I told someone I loved them, and was sick later too. I've never been brave enough to ask. The next thing I remember clearly was being in the main tent with the Doctor explaining a lot and me apologising a bit, just in case.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 5, Scene 2. At dinner beneath the stars.

Cress. Take that, false Doctor! But where are your wires?
In sparks and puffs of smoke you should expire.
Could it be that you are the Doctor true?

Char. Get your claws off him, he's mine, you wild shrew!

Will. Oh, Pillicock sat on pillicock

Char. Will you stop that terrible singing, Will?
The Doctor and I are under attack
From this Troyan host, while you're supping sack.
Join in the scrap and cease your carousel
Lewd songs, anyhow, douse all arousal.

Doct. Vicki, Will, Charley, all, put down those knives!
You're all making the mistakes of your lives.

Cress. Vicki, you say? You should not know that yet.
If you're the young Doctor, we've not yet met.

Doct. Vicki, the reason that I know your name
Is that inwardly I am still the same
Man who left you at Troy some years ago,
I can change my looks, if you didn't know.

Char. Doctor, do you mean that you know this wench?

Doct. We travelled together many years hence.
I think it's time I explain'd the full truth
Of why I've deceived you all, forsooth.

Will. If she's an old friend then tell me why
You did keep that fact from Charley and I?

Doct. This is an old friend, Will, but, what is worse,
She features, in decasyllabic verse,
In a drama that you shall one day pen
That means I shall leave her with this Troyan,
If you only write it because you're here
Chronological conundra appear.
Effects and causes whirl and spin about,
Go through the wringer and turn inside out.
The egg that hatches out your chicken
Does in that self same chicken thicken.

* * *

From *Tales from the Matrix*

Then in direct contravention of fifteen universal laws of Time and two local statutes, the Doctor sat down and explained everything that had happened, and, in explaining it, he brought all the things he was worried about happening that hadn't into the open, didn't he?

Of course, it turned out that some of the things he was worried about were of no concern at all, but as a result of relating them he brought worse problems about.

I expect most of you have read stories about the Doctor in other books, and I expect some of you think he's quite clever, even though he breaks a lot of rules, don't you? Well, you're right! In a crisis, he's just the kind of person you need around, he can come up with ideas almost no one else could. The only problem is, when you're not having a crisis, he's just the kind of person to cause one.

From *The Primary Cressida document*

How embarrassing. It turns out the Doctor was the Doctor after all, only older and with a new face for some strange reason. The girl who drinks too much is his latest companion and the little boy with the dirty songs and the voice like a girl is William Shakespeare! Nice enough lad, no wonder he ends up in the theatre with that voice though, perfect for all those drag roles they gave boys. We had a lovely chat about Dido and Aeneas and told each other about our scrapes with the Daleks, and I let slip the odd thing I knew about his future.

He's told me we should go and settle in England. Apparently there's an old book he's read by a chap called Geoffrey that says relatives of Aeneas were the first Britons I think it's a super idea, ' know Troilus will like it in England, and I think we've persuaded the Doctor too! Just think! could be one of my own ancestors passing on my secret diaries for years and years, a bit like mummy's family did! How smashing would that be?

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

Of course I decided in the end that honesty would be the best policy and that as long as everyone knew the full facts, and swore not to be influenced by them, we could probably darn the hole in causality in such a way that it wouldn't show. I sat everyone down in the central tent and explained. Well, what a Charlie I looked!

* * *

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

Ridiculously, the Doctor had been worried about Wilf getting inspiration for the play *Troilus and Cressida* from meeting the real Troilus and Cressida! I protested that Wilf had already read his own plays in the future anyhow, but the Doctor countered that they'd have been corrupted playing texts and in a court of law it would be hard to prove that was down to him, whereas if Will had got any of the plot or characterisation directly through his adventures with us that was a bit more serious.

That was when Will started laughing.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Tray Act 5, Scene 4. A tent in the camp.

Will. But Doctor, I did not invent the tale
Of Troilus and Cressida's love that fail'd.
Why, Geoffrey Chaucer told it years ago!
I cannot believe that you did not know.
Have you read even half of what you claim
Or do you just like dropping well-known names?
Cressida's tale is part of tradition
Not the result of my precognition
Of future perfect past present events,
If you will forgive me my mangled tense,
And my quondumque futures version
Should have put you off this girl's desertion.

Char. You should have read your *Brodie's Notes on* Will.
The phantom threat you feared from his quill
Was nothing but an insubstantial shade,
And there's a real spectre here I'm afraid.
I'm half a ghost of Christmas yet to come,
Remember, I've made history come undone.
You've got paradoxes enough to be
Getting on with, as far as I can see,
So why do you search for new ones instead
That only exist inside of your head?

Doct. If I had known the work of me laddo
Would I have found menace in my shadow?
I here resolve to watch much less TV
And be the reader I do claim to be.
For half my erudite orations
Come straight from books of quotations.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

'What was Helen of Troy actually like then?' asked William

Shaxberd as he helped himself to more wine.

'Is,' corrected the Doctor, prissily.

'She's a good egg by all accounts,' said Vicki, politely not mentioning the fact she thought her looks had gone, 'and Menelaus was happy enough to have her back, even after all the bother, so she must be quite nice when you get to know her, I suppose.'

'Well, she would have to be a good egg really,' said William, 'Her father was a swan supposedly.' Like most young human men of his generation, he knew the salacious bits of Greek Mythology surprisingly well.

'Half human on his mother's side?' smiled the Doctor, thinking himself clever. 'Aren't we all?'

'No, just men,' said Charlotte through a falafel.

'She has two birthdays they say, one when the egg came out of her mother and another when it hatched,' Troilus revealed, leaning forward over the table and whispering in that conspiratorial manner people sometimes do when divulging well known but dubious trivia.

'It would have been an easy birth if she was born an egg,' said Vicki ruefully, one hand on her stomach.

'An easy lay, you mean,' William corrected.

'So Paris said -'Troilus began, his eyes a twinkle.

He was shouted down by his wife seconds later, barrack room tale untold, and one of those awkward silences ensued that dinner party guests in all cultures and times know only too well.

'Have you actually read *Troilus and Cressida,* Doctor?' asked Charlotte a little later.

'You ask me, who had a hand in some of Shakespeare's finest work -

who put the mixed metaphor in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, who hired the bear for *The Winter's Tale,* and who really shouldn't have passed on the story of A *Midsummer's Night Dream,* if I've read *Troilus and Cressida?'* replied the Doctor, rather over-egging it in that way he usually did when he was on the defensive.

'Yes!' they cried as one.

'Well, no,' admitted the Doctor. 'It's supposed to be one of the better ones, and well, you know, I've been busy. I've still not managed to tune the Time Space Visualiser in to catch all of *The Golden Girls* and I've been trying for decades.'

'She doesn't end up with Troilus in it, she ends up with Diomede, and it's set during the war not after it!' said Charlotte patiently.

'Diomede! That was Steven!' Vicki laughed.

The Doctor looked confused. 'Vicki and Steven were just friends, weren't you? Just the odd haircut and getting locked up together, I thought.'

'Yes, that's right, how many times do we have to go through that?' Vicki explained, giving a petulant Troilus a peck on the cheek.

'Well the legend must have got a bit confused by the time it got written down I think Chaucer got it from a foreign book,' said William, draining his goblet.

The Doctor beamed, thinking he'd got away with his tinkering again. 'So Troilus and Cressida weren't predestined after all!' he said.

'Well, only because of your lack of reading,' snorted Charlotte.

'Oh that is a relief,' said the Doctor taking the wine jug from William and helping himself without asking.

'Now what about this business of giving us charts to help us reach this Britain young Will spoke of?' asked Troilus, passing the Doctor

a goat's cheese nibble.

'I really shouldn't,' explained the Doctor. 'If you go there, on the basis of the frankly dubious history of Geoffrey of Monmouth then Vicki is in danger of becoming one of her own descendants, which is at least as bad as the things I've been trying to prevent all day.'

'Oh go on Doctor, please!' begged Vicki. 'We could mine tin in Cornwall and I'd promise not to invent anything I shouldn't as long as I lived, not even roller skates!'

'I don't think I should. I've made enough of a mess looking after young Charley here, the repercussions of me sending you to Britain because the unborn Shakespeare suggested it could be horrendous,' said the Doctor, finally being responsible for once in his lives.

'Oh go on Doctor, I'm unborn too, remember, so that shouldn't matter much,' said Vicki.

'And I'm only half here,' said Charlotte grimly 'Why stop messing about now? You should have stayed at home watching these *Golden Girls* of yours if you weren't prepared to get involved in real people's lives. They're messy and not always in the order you'd like and sometimes too short, and they're not always better for having you in them, but you either face that or hide away somewhere, don't you?'

The Doctor kissed her.

'What was that for?' asked Charlotte.

'To shut you up,' he said. He tapped Vicki on the nose and smiled, 'Come on, let's carry on the party, and in the morning, when rosy-fingered Dawn has done her bit, we'll sort out a good map of Europe for the Trojans and get them started on their boats. Any consequences which haven't happened yet we can worry about later!'

Some of you will be shocked at just how naughty the Doctor was in this story: jeopardising the stability of all those will-have-might-

have- been futures out there depending on him by interweaving all those strands of destiny connected to the Dalek race and all on the basis of a whim.

The Doctor already knew Dalek causality was partially snagged in a loop in Time and his friend was the focus of a temporal anomaly, but of course he *had* spent a jolly long time in the Vortex, hadn't he?

That meant his causal connections to events future, past and maybe-somehow were a great deal more jumbled up than most people's and he was quite good at judging just how likely to snaggle the Web of Time his whims might be.

Or so he thought.

The Doctor believed in two very wrong things you see; firstly, in something he called personal morality that he thought was more important than doing the things simply everyone knows are right, and secondly, that he was cleverer than everyone else and could always sort things out.

He deserved what happened to him next, didn't he?

Document from the Braxiatel Collection Shakespearean Ephemera wing, a note found in the effects ofWilliam Shakespeare by literary assessor Porlock. It is not believed to be in Shakespeare's hand though it bears some graphological similarities to the disputed Scarlioni *Hamlet* manuscript.

List of things not to mention

* The Daleks,

- That you've met me before when we meet next (because you didn't mention it last time, you know),

- That you've read *half* your plays already

- That I wrote all the good bits in *Hamlet,*

['good bits' later amended to 'rubbish bits' in a different hand]

* The idea of cigars (until Raleigh gets back from abroad),

* That cigars will end up named after some of your characters,

* That someone called Raleigh will go abroad,

* That Troilus and Cressida had a lovely marriage and lived happily ever after in Mousehole, no matter how the story goes in Chaucer,

* Oh, the places you've gone and the things that you've seen.

Short Trips: A Universe of Terrors

Once I had accepted the job of editing *Short Trips* volume three, two decisions followed very easily. The first of these was the tide. *A Universe of Terrors* (which echoes the quote, "There are some corners of the universe that have bred the most terrible things..." from *The Moonbase*) sums up for me why Doctor Who is so much more appealing as a SF franchise than, say, *Stargate* or *Star Trek*. While those shows depict a universe full of aliens who are usually rational, if not always friendly, *Doctor Who* depicts a universe which is dangerous and nightmarish, populated by monsters who can't be reasoned with, and whose only purpose in life is to kill you stone dead. While previous Short Trips books had been true to the spirit of the show, I felt they were inclined too much towards its whimsical side. I wanted mine to be darker.

My second easy decision, given that, was to commission a Tara Samms story. One of the gems in Stephen Cole's original Short Trips, published by BBC Books in 1998, was Glass, a Samms story in which a woman is plagued by visions of an evil little boy's face in every plane of glass she sees. Concise, effective, and deeply disturbing, it was exactly the sort of thing I was after for the book. Face- Painter, ultimately, turned out to be even more unsettling, in part because the victims in this story are the Doctor and his companions. Unusually too, the short story format allows us to experience to full horror of the grisly premise without the need for the traditional structure of a Doctor Who adventure: though we know of course that our friends must have escaped this situation somehow, we're not allowed the comfort of seeing it.

John Binns

Face-Painter
Tara Samms

Thursday afternoon, and time to take the faceless kids on their weekly outing to Santa Monica Boulevard. First I tie their wrists all together with bright handkerchiefs, so they make a human chain. Then I lead them out into the street.

I used to feel self-conscious with them. I mean, they're OK from the neck down, I dress them in baggy white T-shirts and blue jeans and sneakers. But what can you do with the heads? Each one's just a big pink egg, smooth, blank, completely hairless. OK, I can put them in caps. Easy. But they don't got ears, or eyes, or a nose or nothing. It's like when you sometimes see a baby bird that's fallen out of its nest and left for dead. It's hairless and pink, sort of puckered skin. That's what my kids have got for faces.

Mostly I wrap big scarves round their chins, or dress them in balaclavas. They don't like it much 'cause it's July, and it's sooo hot out there, but it means less people notice the weird shit going on with their faces. Luckily in this part of West Hollywood, no one looks too hard at no one for long, unless they want trouble.

So my kids and me, every Thursday we go out to the Face-Painter off Santa Monica Boulevard. So many glitzy galleries and boutiques filled with avant-garde crap there that some people look at my boys and girl, and they think it's some kind of statement or something.

I should say, they're not really kids, and they sure ain't mine. They've got grown-up bodies - the girl's got tits under her T-shirt, and the boy's definitely a boy, even if I can't understand half of what he says with the accent and all. And the other guy, well - their heads all look the same but I think he's the oldest, though sometimes he can be more of a kid than either of his buddies. I'm paid to baby-sit them, look after them a little, and make sure they don't go running away. The boss don't want them running away no more - says they did that all the time when he kept them locked up by themselves.

I think maybe they like it better here with me, but none of them say much. Victoria's the worst for that. Real quiet. Not just because she don't have a mouth - they can all speak if they want, it just comes out kind of muffled, like I gagged them or something. Well, it weren't me that gagged them.

When they do talk it's freaky, 'cause their chin moves about like they're chewing. They can all see, too, though not so clearly, like they're looking through bandages. I don't know how that works, and I don't know how come they can breathe either. They even eat - though with the kind of crud I cook up, God knows they probably don't want to. If they try real hard then this little black slit opens up out of nowhere and lets stuff in. But I don't look too closely. That stuff still freaks me out a little, even after two months.

'Come on, kids,' I have to say, because they never seem to look forward to our trips to the Face-Painter, and they dawdle and drag like they're little kids and sulking. You'd think they'd like it 'cause they're kept shut away most of the rest of the time, and Face-Painter's not just a Face-Painter. Tattoos are his thing. I love to look at the different designs you can get. I got me one already on my butt, this little lamb. Least, I think it's a lamb. Real cute, anyway.

Face-Painter's got grey hair that used to be black. He keeps it slicked back in this big kick-ass ponytail thing so it looks wet and tight all the time, and like he's wrung half the colour out of it. He's a big guy. I mean, I'm pretty big myself, but with him it's all muscle. He wears one of those tight muscle-Ts that show them off. His arms are busy with all kinds of shit, eagles and knives and hearts and crossed-out lovers. He's kind of got this big doughy face and it's like his shades are glued to his nose or something, and he's got this pissed-off look there the whole time if he's not doing his thing, working with the needles - or painting the faces on my three kids. The second he starts doing the thing he loves, he's happy again. He lives for that stuff, I can see it, and when he gets started that's when I want to go right up and stick my tongue down his throat, mmm. Except I guess that would kind of distract him, and I don't want him mad at me. Or hurling all over his shop.

‘Hey, Rachel,’ he says as I drag my three inside. He likes us ‘cause we make appointments, every week, and he writes them down. He likes having appointments, I can tell.

My three kids stand there. The paint always wears off within a week so their faces are just blank sheets each time we come to call on Face- Painter. ‘So what’s it gonna be?’ he asks. He always asks me instead of them.

‘Victoria?’ I ask.

She pulls out the same well-folded piece of paper she does every week. It has this little sketch she did with some pencils I gave her. It’s a girl with brown hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, full lips. There’s something kind of old-fashioned about the picture, like the way she talks. Face-Painter sighs, he knows this picture off by heart. But he takes it from me: this paper that’s been folded so many times it might crumble in his hands, and for once he looks at Victoria and he says,

‘You want it just like *this? Just* like this?’ ‘Yes,’ she says softly.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes… please.’

Sometimes he paints in a brown fringe over her forehead, has it curl in round the edges. It’s a nice touch. She likes it when he does that. ‘How about you, Jimmy?’

He grunts. ‘Jamie.’

‘The bionic woman’s name is Jaime, honey,’ I say, ‘it’s a girl’s name,’ and Face-Painter cracks up. Makes my smile grow wider.

‘Och, I dinnae care what you paint there. No one sees it in any case.’

‘Temper,’ I tell him. ‘C’mon, who d’you wanna be this week?’ He don’t say nothing. ‘Make him Brad Pitt,’ I tell Face-Painter. ‘A girl

can dream, right?'

He grunts again, looks me up and down as he does it. And I guess he don't much like what he sees, 'cause suddenly he's nodding to the third little freak in my outing.

'Well, Doc?' I ask him. He thinks he's a doctor.

The Doc doesn't answer, just fiddles with his hands. I ask again, and one last time, but it's no good with him. He won't crack. He gets like this sometimes, and though he ain't got no eyes to show you, you look at him too long and you get to thinking maybe you're the freak.

'Give him something special,' I suggest. And, real obliging, he goes to the back of his little shop and gets out the board with all his personal designs pinned to it, just for me - the ones he made up himself that you can't get nowhere else. And I see there's this wicked sunflower thing there, and I point it out and say, 'Go for it. Let's see how it looks.'

And so the Doctor sits himself down nice and easy and Face-Painter goes to work with his airbrush, and within an hour there's a beautiful bright sunflower sitting on that wide, blank empty face.

'That *is fine;* I say: Could you do me one of those round about here?' And I pull down the strap of my top a little, show him the part where my breast just starts to get a little fleshy. He looks, and his expression don't change.

'Uh-huh,' he says. 'Maybe. But these ones cost.'

'I'll make an appointment,' I say.

'Maybe so, but they cost. You can't get 'em nowhere else.'

I pull up on my strap again.

'Maybe just look at the one I done here,' he says, and waves his big hand over at the Doctor.

‘Oh, I will.’ I put his Dodgers cap on the Doctor’s head and it’s like, a cap on a sunflower and it looks crazy and we both laugh, me and Face-Painter, while the other two just sit there hand in hand, silent, waiting to be next.

And Face-Painter does Jimmy just like Brad Pitt, it’s hilarious. But Victoria he’s wicked to - he paints the face on the paper exactly like he told her he would, only he’s painted all those deep folds in the paper on her face too, and she looks like she’s been in some real bad accident. And she starts making this sobbing sound though no tears can come out ‘cause she ain’t got no eyes, but she can see what he’s done in the cracked mirror he holds up to her, and he’s looking at me and saying, ‘What the hell! Next week I’ll paint her a new face and leave out the folds, what’s her problem?’

‘You’re so boring,’ I tell them, once we’re back home. It was too hot to go outside, everything’s sticking to me. ‘You’re just never happy, are you?’ And I sound like I’m pissed at them for showing me up down Face-Painter’s, but really I’m just pissed with the whole deal. This damn apartment with its dark chocolate walls and cracked windows, full of all my old shit I ain’t got round to cleaning up yet, and this damn neighbourhood that’s all chain-link fences and tied-up dogs that bark all night, and redneck junkies who crank up the TV real high then zone out in front of the NBA so it sounds like I got a stadium next door. And you go out just to get the kids some pizza or buy some groceries or something and on every corner you get these damn Ruskie immigrants hanging round, checking your ass and speaking Slav to their buddies and sniggering. *There goes the girl with the fat ass,* they say. I just bet. I bet they wouldn’t even notice Victoria got no face, they’d just check the ass and bang! Pick her over me. And I get mad at my kids, just thinking about what those Ruskies must be saying, and I yell and shoo all three of them down to the basement, which is kind of where they live and where they spend most days.

It’s not so bad down there. Got three little bunks side by side so they can sleep all together - not like *that,* I don’t hear no noises or nothing. They’re not like that, just friends. They care about each other, you know? It’s sweet.

I got a little bathroom down there for them too. And they're real neat. Well house-trained, and no bother most of the time, unless Victoria throws one of her conniption fits. She makes me laugh 'cause she gets madder and madder and her voice gets louder and louder but her words, they're always clean. A good girl is Miss Prissy-ass Victoria.

But they know I look after them, so why should they want to piss me off? I give them stuff to read. Paper and pens so they can write and draw and stuff. If they get me mad, I could stop giving them that shit. I could do that, easy - and the Doctor, he's a real one for writing, he would just hate it if I cut off his supply. He draws all these weird diagrams and shit; math stuff, mostly. Anyway, they're not much trouble and the boss pays me just fine.

I get them little treats sometimes. A flower for Victoria. A real bright bulb they can screw into the single socket when the Doctor wants to do some of his mad professor scribbles. And Jimmy loves Big Macs. I get him one on Sundays. I used to get it for the others but Victoria went all hissy over the grease and shit and the Doctor, well, he hardly eats a damn thing anyway. But then, Jimmy works out, he needs the red meat. He runs round that little basement, and does press-ups and sit- ups and squat thrusts until the whole little hole stinks of his sweat. But the others don't say nothing. Jimmy says he wants to be ready for the day he gets out of here, for the day he steals back his face from wherever it's hidden. And I hear him plot and plan and it makes me kind of sad, but man, I love to stand at the top of those little steps and breathe in his sweat.

I turn out the light at 7.30 - the switch is on my floor, at the top of the stairs - and I lock the door. But first I make them say 'Goodnight and thank you for looking after me', because that is what I would've said each night to my mom and dad if they had stuck around. That is what my little Aylisha would say to me each night, if those prim city bitches had believed I was clean, and let me keep her.

I hear the kids talking after the light's off, even over the noise from next door and the deaf-aid lady clomping about in the place above. They don't know I listen, but the sound carries real well. There's

this hole in the flue leading up from down there, see, where the last tenant must've punched right through the wall or something.

'How many weeks has it been now, Doctor?' I hear Victoria whisper. Jimmy's told her off before for asking that question so often, and she's tried staying quiet, but I guess she always finds it worse being trapped away underground when she's had her weekly trip outside.

'Well, we've had eight faces painted, now,' murmurs the Doctor. 'So that's eight weeks.'

'It feels like forever,' she says. 'At least when we were locked up before we were normal. We were *us.'*

'We're still us, Victoria,' says the Doctor, but it don't even sound like *he* believes it.

'Have you seen those jars yon big lass keeps in her room?' Jamie sounds thoughtful. 'I reckon we might find our faces in one of those.' He cracks me up, and I take another swig of vodka. He's talking about a couple of bell jars I got stowed behind the couch, you can just see them from the hallway. I keep pennies and quarters in one and rubber bands, hair grips, all kinds of crap in the other. No faces, kid. The Doctor's got this kind of flat note to his voice, like he can't believe he has to say this out loud. 'Jamie, I've told you before, I'm sure our faces haven't really been taken. It's a trick of some kind.' 'Well, have you no' got the trick to get us them back again?'

I hold my breath, stop crunching chips, while I wait for his reply. 'Not yet,' he says defensively, 'But I'm sure I shall.'

'You've been sure for a long time,' says Victoria softly, 'but we're still like this.'

I take another swig. 'You and me both, honey,' I mutter.

'The facial nerve is unaffected,' says the Doc, and then he's spouting off at them: 'We can still control the muscles in our faces, the glands

in our palates still function effectively, taste-buds in the anterior two- thirds of the -'

'We have no faces, Doctor,' Victoria hisses, and from her breathing it's like she's building up to a conniption. 'And I can't bear it. Stuck down here out of the light, out of the sun... These dreadful, shapeless clothes, greasy, sickly food, smelly paint all over my face...'

'I know it's very difficult, but you must save your strength, Victoria,' says the Doctor firmly. 'Whoever's done this to us wants to diminish us, to wear us down, to make us despair.'

'The way it hurts to breathe, like you're breathing through a pillow,' Victoria carries on like he's not spoken. And he doesn't butt in again, just lets her speak about how hard her life is now.

I sit there listening and crunching my chips and gulping my drink and getting real mad, and I feel like going down there and kicking Victoria's skinny white ass and telling her to shut her mouth with all her complaining, 'cept she don't have one. Then I get to feeling kind of sorry for them all again.

And I get to wishing I could tell Face-Painter the whole story about them, next time I see him. Tell him how the big man pays me and all, for taking care of them, and how he chose me 'cause he knows I don't use, and he knows I used to take care of my girl real good till they took her away, and how he thinks that helping my little faceless kids will help me too. And it's true, I do feel better about myself. Still down, but better than I have in a long, long time.

I hear the guys next door screaming at their TV. I wonder if they've ever looked at my place and noticed anyone's alive in it.

And I get up and flick on the basement light and shout down to the boy, 'Hey, Jimmy. I want to see you up here. Just you. Let's go.'

And I wait till hear him coming up the stairs. 'You try any tricks on me,' I warn him, 'and something real bad's gonna happen to your friends. *He'll* see to that.' He stays quiet. 'So promise me, no tricks.'

He promises, and so I turn the key and let him out.

He stands there, still dressed in his faded jeans and loose white T-shirt and if I'd drunk any more tonight I might really think I was looking at Brad Pitt. Face-Painter is good, and Jimmy's looking fine.

'What do you want?' he asks, suspicious-like.

'I want to show you something,' I say. And I take his hand and lead him in a passable straight line over to the jars behind the couch.

He sees them and his shoulders slump.

'I don't have your faces stowed away here, Jimmy boy.'

'Aye, well. Mebbe you keep them in another jar.'

I shake my head: 'What is it with you and the jar thing, huh?'

'All I know is, I went to sleep two months ago with a face and when I woke up it was gone.' He thumps his fist into his hand: And how can that be? And why are we being kept here with you, week after week?'

It's amazing, I'm hearing all this anger but Brad's face is placid and pure, smiling at me. It makes me want to smile back at him. 'Maybe someone wanted to borrow your faces,' I say. 'Maybe someone's running round pretending to be you, having such a ball they don't want to give you your face back.' I place my hand on his chest. Been so long since I touched a man: Was it good being you, honey? I bet it was real sweet, huh?'

He angles his bald head down to my carpet. I know he's sad. 'Someone else might have my face, you say?'

'Maybe. But what do I know?'

He turns around, away from me, and for a second I press my hand against his back. I guess I don't know what I'm doing. I'm feeling sorry for him, or for myself, but I'm thinking maybe my kids

deserve better than this. Better than what's been given to them. Better than what I can give to them. And I know then I've had too much to drink because I'm feeling kind of warm and thinking maybe I can change and start that diet or save for the surgeon, and get myself straight and maybe get Aylisha back... All that crap.

And I'm thinking next week I might ask Face-Painter to put his own face on Jimmy's empty slate. Or tomorrow. Maybe I could go back tomorrow, who says I should wait for a week? He was mean to do that to Victoria's face, she would maybe lighten up if I took her back and got him to do it fresh. We would all feel better.

He turns back round and I take my hand away. He reaches for it, holds it softly in his.

'You lonely?' I whisper. 'Only I know what that's like, feeling lonely even when you got people there in your face, all around.' I could put my arms around him and shut my eyes and pretend he was someone real. I want to put out the lights and hold him and we could just -

He twists my hand. 'Give us back our faces!' he yells. 'Where have you put them?'

'You promised!' I yell at him.

'Where, woman!'

I swear and shout, though no one will hear me. They'll hear the game and those damn dogs, but they won't hear me. I struggle against him but he's reaching in to my pocket and groping for the key, and he's squeezing his hand there against my gut and I feel ashamed of what he must think when he feels all that flab, and then he's got the key and I'm hard on my knees on the floor, crying my eyes out, and I'm too drunk to get back up. There's a confused babble of voices from the basement, it carries right up to me. Then the three of them are suddenly free and skipping about my living room, and it's about the only real living been done there in years.

'Don't go,' I say, snot-nosed and dribbling, wiping my eyes. I liked

looking after them. Been feeling happier. A better person.

‘Doctor, what are you waiting for?’Victoria says, high and hysterical, hovering by the front door. ‘Come on!’

‘But she’s right.’ The Doctor’s hopping from foot to foot like he just wet his blue jeans or something. That crazy sunflower face moves from side to side. ‘Something bad might happen to us if we do this.’

‘You’re not wanting to go back down there!’ Jimmy shouts.

‘Each time we escape we’re punished!’ he yells. ‘Something’s taken away from us!’ His hands hover round his pockets like he wants to stick them inside, but the pants are too tight. ‘What will we lose next? Our voices? Our sight? Our freedom even to *think?’*

‘What’ll happen if we just stay here?’ Jimmy insists. ‘Nothing! Nothing ever! We have to get away!’

‘We won’t find our faces in any jar outside!’ the Doctor storms, the centre of the sunflower one big eye staring out from the bald face. ‘We won’t find them hanging on a peg somewhere, ready for us to slip back on.’ He holds out his hands to his friends. ‘I’ve told you, we’re suffering from some kind of illusion, a spell that’s been placed on us somehow. That’s all. We’ll find a way out of this, I promise you. But if we try to leave now…’

Victoria and Jimmy stand there, all crumpled in their jeans and T-shirts. Brad looks calm and assured. The girl painted on Victoria’s face has lines in all the wrong places. She looks terrible, small and frail in

the oversized clothes I picked out for her. And the TV noise goes on outside, the tethered-up dogs bark same as every night.

‘Listen to that dreadful din,’ says Victoria quietly. ‘Where could we run to, Jamie?’

She comes over and stands in front of me, where I’m still kneeling and snorting and crying and stuff. And she does this little curtsey

and says, ‘Thank you for looking after me. Goodnight.’

And down she goes to the basement.

The Doctor holds out his hand to Jimmy, who turns and faces the door. The Doctor stands there with his arm out for a full minute till Brad Pitt turns round and takes it, and they go down the steps holding hands.

The door swings quietly shut behind them. The key is still in the lock.

I turn that key.

‘You promised,’ I bellow down at the things shut behind the basement door. And I scream and I fling open my front door and I march out and hurl the key away into the noisy night, and then I follow it.

Next morning I pitch up at Face-Painter’s, with all the cash I got - money that was meant for the kids, but screw them. They want to screw with me? No way.

He opens at 9.30. I hear bolts sliding and then the door opens up. He sees me. He’s wearing his shades and I can’t blame him; the sunlight’s too bright and too yellow. I only wish I could find mine in all the crap back home.

‘Hey,’ says Face-Painter, and puts his sign out on the sidewalk. His biceps bulge under his shirt, and his tight gut spills over his waistband. I can see the little hairs standing up there. ‘You all alone today?’

I don’t want to talk about it. ‘That sunflower you did yesterday? I want it.’

‘Tattoo?’ he asks. ‘You sure?’

‘Sure. I know I don’t got an appointment, but...’

‘Only, you know, a tattoo’s for life.’

‘I want it.’

‘And they cost. Those designs.’

‘I want it, Face-Painter. For life.’

‘That’s a real long time.’

But he beckons me and then I’m walking into his cool, sweat-stinking shop, right to the back, and I’m sitting on the leather, and thinking of Jimmy last night and how it felt to be touching his back and feel the warm skin beneath his shirt.

‘Why d’you come to me, Rachel?’ he asks, as he sorts through his inks.

‘You’re the best in the west,’ I tell him, but he’s looking at my eyes like he can see they’re blotchy and red from all the tears last night.

‘No. You come to me because it’s the rules,’ he says, flicking on the TV for reruns of some old black and white show. ‘Thursday afternoons, time to take the faceless kids down to get painted. You don’t come here any other time. So why’d you break the rules?’

‘What you talking about?’

‘Those three freaks of yours. You were getting good money taking care of them. So why’d you blow it?’ He sounds like he’s pissed at me, like he knows all about last night. ‘You had to go and break the rules. You had to go and spoil things for yourself. You told the boss man you were through spoiling things for yourself.’ He comes up close and he places one big hand on my face, holds it real tight, squeezes.

And I’m crying out in his quiet little shop, ‘I just wanted to do something for me. This damn city’s so loud you never get heard.’ His fingers are digging in hard. ‘Listen, I want the sunflower, that’s all.’ My voice is coming out all slurred and muffled through his

thick fingers. ‘I want to be looked at. I want to be seen.’

Face-Painter shakes his head. ‘In this part of town,’ he says, reaching for his needles, ‘no one looks too hard at no one for long unless they want trouble.’

And behind his shades I see he ain’t got no eyes. It’s just bare skin And I know he’s gonna take something from me, and it might be my stupid mouth or my stupid cry-baby eyes but I reckon maybe he’ll leave my ears because he knows I hate this damn town being so noisy all the God-damn time, and he knows I ain’t never getting out, I guess just like my three kids are never getting out now and who’ll take us down here on a Thursday? And my ears are full of the sound of screams and they’re all *mine* as his smile falls away, and that big empty space where Face-Painter’s mouth was is pressing up to me.

Short Trips: The Muses

So, a different approach yet again for my third collection. No more would I have to choose between stories, as everyone pitched for the same subject/ Doctor etc. This time I approached nine writers, and asked if they would be so kind as to do a story for a certain Muse, featuring a certain Doctor. So I didn't know what I was going to get until the stories arrived, but with writers of the calibre of Robert Shearman, Gareth Roberts and Paul Magrs I knew I wouldn't be disappointed. Have I mentioned how difficult a task this has been, to choose a favourite story from each collection? Well, I'll mention it now. I love some of these stories. To choose between this funny one, this dramatic one, this beautiful one - well, it's not been easy. If only I'd had an entire volume to put all my favourite stories in... oh, right, yes, that was The Muses.

But, despite fierce competition, here I had to pick the story that has made me cry more than any other Doctor Who short story ever: The Glass Princess by Justin Richards. As Justin's written scores of best-selling books, it may be a bit egotistical of me to think he wrote his best ever story for my collection, but it's undoubtedly my favourite piece of his writing - and what's more, it's a multi-Doctor story too.

Jacqueline Rayner

The Glass Princess
Justin Richards

On her fifth birthday, Princess Clio started to die.

The palace ballroom was a thick forest of legs and dresses as her father led her proudly to the front. Mother walked beside her, holding her hand. Mother was wearing her pink dress, the one with the white roses and the lace collar. People applauded and faces dipped into view and smiled. It was her birthday and everything in the world was lovely.

There would be food, drinks, her friends the Archduke's children had come to play. And there would be presents. Mother said that everything would be 'just so' and father had muttered that at least Cousin Malvek was not coming. Clio knew her father's cousin was the Regent of Dolmara and Father did not like him. His name was mentioned in whispers when no one smiled. Anise had told Clio once that if Father died, Clio would be queen. Once she was five. But if Clio then died, Cousin Malvek would be king.

'And what if I die before Father?' she had asked her nanny, not knowing what dying was and wondering if it hurt. 'Will Cousin Malvek be king then?'

Nanny Anise had smiled, and shaken her head. 'He would become the heir to the throne. But it won't happen that way.'

Clio thought about Cousin Malvek because Uncle Ferdand was there. His saggy, wrinkled face smiled at her for a moment as she passed before turning quickly away. Uncle Ferdand often visited the Palace, though everyone else called him 'Ambassador'. Father would keep him waiting, and if he saw her, Ferdand would talk quietly and nicely to Clio. They played 'I Spy' in the palace anterooms, and he told her stories of his home on Dolmara. He told her how many light years away it was, how his children were all grown up with children of their own now He showed her holosnaps of an old lady he called 'Darling', and of his grandchildren. Clio

hoped he thought she was grand too. She hoped he had brought her a present.

At the front of the room, Mother helped Clio up the steps to join her father on the dais. When she turned she could see the people properly, being higher up. There were so many people, and she could see now that they were standing in rows, like pieces on Father's chessboard. There was silence as they waited for Father to speak.

'As you know,' he said, 'today is my daughter's birthday. Today she is five years old. The age of heredity, in our ancient law. The age where traditionally she is deemed ready and able to assume the throne. When she is made officially my heir.' His voice was strange today. It was a bit like the voice he used in meetings and speeches and on the holovidcasts. But it was also a bit like the voice he used to Clio and her mother when they were alone. Clio stood still and listened, because that was what princesses did.

'But, as I say, that is ancient law. Whereas today is a celebration, it is a birthday party, not a state event,' Father said. 'And now Clio has a few words of her own, I think.'

She was aware of Father looking down at her. He was smiling. She bit her lip, feeling suddenly hot. She hoped she remembered the words properly. She hoped she could speak as loud and clear and slow as Father had shown her. She hoped her dress looked pretty, but Mother was smiling so she knew everything would be all right.

She remembered to look out into the room, not down at her feet. Right at the front of the crowd of people was an old man with long white hair that curled down over the back of his collar. His eyes were alive and his smile was real. Clio had seen lots of smiles that weren't. The old man nodded, just slightly - just enough to say: 'Go on, it'll be all right.' His eyes twinkled with encouragement and amusement, and Clio spoke.

'Thank you all for coming to my party' she said. She said it clearly and loudly and slowly. When she finished, there was silence. Everyone was still looking at her. Clio was not sure what happened

next, so she turned to her Mother and said - clearly and loudly and slowly - ‘Can I have my presents now?’ She could see Uncle Ferdand as she said it. She saw that he was not smiling, and his eyes were not twinkling. ‘Please,’ she added hurriedly, hoping no one else had noticed her rudeness. It was rude not to say please. Uncle Ferdand’s face disappeared behind someone else’s shoulder, as if he was looking down at his feet. He wasn’t talking, so that was probably all right.

Mother was smiling, and Father laughed, his hand pressing briefly against her back.

‘I think we all know where a child’s priorities lie,’ he said. Then he started to clap slowly and carefully, nodding and smiling at his daughter as the room erupted into applause. Father leaned down to whisper to Clio as the audience continued to clap. ‘Of course you can have your presents now,’ he said. ‘You’ve earned them, my little princess.

There were so many presents that after a long time they brought Clio a chair. She sat on her chair on the dais and one by one the people came up, handed her a present, and waited politely and expectantly as Clio opened it.

At first she was careful with the paper. At first she teased the tape and gently undid the ribbon. But before very long she was tearing and ripping into each package. She hardly had time to look at the present before it was gently lifted from her hands and disappeared. On the edge of the dais one ofFather’s helpers was noting down everything she got. The torn paper and empty boxes also disappeared. Clio hoped they were keeping the best boxes - Anise would make things from them.

Clio was not disappointed with her presents. Many were jewellery, necklaces, ornaments that caught and reflected the light. But there were some toys. The Archduke’s children - Alex and Natasha - gave her a game with little figures and a holobook of fairy tales.

The old man at the front of the room had not come up to the dais yet. He stayed at the front of the room, watching the line of people,

nodding and smiling and enjoying Clio opening her presents. But she hardly noticed. She was waiting to see what Uncle Ferdand had brought her. She could see the top of his bald head shining under the chandeliers as he moved closer to her, as the line of people waiting moved slowly along.

'Hello, Uncle Ferdand.'

He smiled back at her. But for once it did not seem like it was a real smile. His hands were damp when she took the box from him. Damp and cold, and trembling. When he blinked, his eyes were pale and watery. He looked so old, Clio thought. 'Happy birthday,' he said quietly, and looked away from her eyes.

The paper tore easily, making a satisfying sound as Clio ripped it away from the polished wooden box. 'What is it?' She opened the lid and looked eagerly inside. 'Oh - how lovely. Look, Mother.' She held the box so Mother could see inside. Father leaned over too so as to see the slippers.

Two delicate, tiny slippers that glittered as they reflected the light. They looked like they had been carved out of diamond, the facets of the crystal flashing and sparkling as she lifted them from the box. 'Can I try them on? Now? Can I?' She heard Uncle Ferdand catch his breath, and she thought how pleased he must be that she liked them.

Mother helped her take her shoes off, and Father put the slippers down on the floor in front of the chair. The light from them dazzled Clio as she slipped her foot into one of them. It was snug and comfortable, despite being glass or crystal. 'It fits perfectly,' she said. 'They were made especially for you,' Uncle Ferdand said. But he still was not looking at her. Perhaps it was the light shining in her eyes but it seemed to Clio that the old man was almost crying. His lips were pressed tightly together and his eyes were deep, pale wells.

The second shoe fitted as perfectly as the first. Until she eased her foot right inside. Clio gasped, and it seemed as though Ferdand gasped with her. A sudden shooting pain in her big toe as it met the

end of the shoe. She could see her feet inside the slippers, distorted and faceted. There was nothing inside the shoe that could hurt, but she had felt a jab of pain. Like treading on broken glass.

‘What is it?’ Mother asked.

Clio pulled the shoe off. ‘My toe,’ she explained. She looked up to see ifUncle Ferdand was upset, she did not want him to be upset. But he had gone. She looked to her Father, but he was turned away - nodding and gesturing to one of the soldiers at the side of the dais. The soldier was talking into his glove, the way they sometimes did to send messages. From the back of the room, Clio thought she could hear voices, but Mother was holding her foot in her hand. In the other hand Mother held the slipper.

‘Please - may I?’The voice was gentle and kind, old but firm. It was the man who had been watching, the man with the white hair. He lifted the slipper from Mother’s hand. Held it up and sniffed cautiously at it, then turned it so he could peer inside. When he tipped it up, a drop of clear liquid formed, grew, dripped.

Clio was feeling tired. Everything blurred as if she had stayed up too late and she felt her eyelids flutter as she tried to keep awake.

‘A tiny glass needle at the end of the shoe. Hidden by the way the design is cut, you see?’ She could barely focus on him now, but the old man sounded pleased with himself.

‘What was in it?’ Her father’s voice.

The old man’s reply had lost its enthusiasm. ‘I don’t know, I’m afraid. I don’t know. But I think we should find out, don’t you? Hmm?’

‘What was in it?’ Father asked again, his voice hard and sharp as glass. But Clio could see that this time he was asking someone else. Someone held by the soldiers. Someone that Clio realised with muzzy surprise was Uncle Ferdand. And he was crying.

‘Your highness - I’m sorry,’ Uncle Ferdand said between sobs. ‘So

sorry.'

'Then why?' the white-haired old man asked. 'Why, sir?'

'Because I too have children. And they have children of their own.'
'A life for a life?' Father was asking. He sounded like he did when he spoke to the important soldiers sometimes.

The room was empty now, except for the soldiers and Uncle Ferdand, Clio and her parents. And the old man. She did not remember the people leaving. 'Is the party over?' she asked the old man who was now holding her foot, looking carefully at her poorly toe.

'I'm afraid it may be,' he said.

'How is she, doctor?' Mother asked. He did not reply.

'Am I sick?'

The doctor turned to look at Uncle Ferdand. 'Well?' he asked. 'Is she?'

'She is dying.'

'Does that mean Uncle Malvek will be king?' Clio asked.

'It means,' Mother said quietly - so quietly that Clio wondered if she was supposed to hear - 'that there will be war.'

Clio closed her eyes. It must be bedtime. She could look at her presents again tomorrow. She could play with Alex and Natasha tomorrow. Through the gathering sleep, she could hear Uncle Ferdand's voice, though she could hardly make out his words.

It wasn't meant to be like this. She would just hurt her foot. Then natural causes. No blame or anger. Just sorrow and weeping. She shouldn't have put the slipper on, not here, not now. With people watching.'

‘But she did, sir,’ the Doctor said. ‘And if I am to help her, I need to know what was in that needle.

‘She is beyond help.’

Father’s anger almost woke her again. ‘What was in it?’

Almost. Then she was slipping away once more. Already she must be dreaming, Clio thought.

‘Senexium Pulverate.’

Clio’s eyes opened again, just for a moment. Just long enough to see Uncle .Ferdand’s trembling hand go to his mouth. Just long enough to look into his brimming eyes. When his hand moved away, he seemed to say: ‘I’m sorry Clio,’ only there was no sound. No sound but Father’s shout, then the soldier trying to reach into Uncles mouth, and the foam and his screams, and Ferdand’s body falling to the floor.

The doctor’s sad smile filled her vision for an instant, then Clio’s eyes fluttered shut. Before she slept, she heard his words, as if filtered into her dream:

‘I haven’t given you *my* present yet, Clio.’ And the sounds she heard as she drifted into a long sleep were like Father’s pen scratching on the pages of his journal.

* * *

Anise was shaking her, ever so gently. Clio opened her eyes, wondering for a moment where she was. It felt like her bed, but above and around it was a cat’s cradle of tubes and wires. It seemed to hum and pulse with a life of its own. Like a monster, asleep.

‘It’s time to get up, Clio,’ Allise was saying. Her eyes were damp but she was smiling. ‘Time for the party.’

‘Party?’ She was still sleepy as she swung her legs out of bed. ‘I’ve got your dress ready - look. It’s your favourite colour.’

‘Is it someone’s birthday?’ Clio had not seen the dress before, but it was lovely and it was red. It sparkled and shone in the soft morning light.

‘It’s *your* birthday,’ Allise said. ‘You are six years old today.’

They were waiting for her in the banqueting hall - Mother and Father, Alex and Natasha with their mother. And another man that Clio did not know, but who grinned at her as if he was an old friend.

‘Happy birthday, my darling,’ Mother hugged and kissed Clio as soon as she was in the room.

‘But that was yesterday,’ Clio said. ‘We had a party and everything. I want to play with my presents.’

For a moment everyone was quiet. Then Father cleared his throat. He looked pale and tired, Clio thought. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘But now you have a birthday every day.’ He looked over at the strange little man with the dark hair and crumpled clothes. ‘Isn’t that right, doctor?’

The man - the doctor - nodded. ‘That’s right’

‘You’re not the doctor I saw yesterday.’

‘No,’ the man admitted. ‘I suppose I’m not. But I know him as well as I know myself.’

‘He promised me a present.’

‘Clio,’ her Mother murmured.

‘He did,’ she protested. ‘But I fell asleep before he gave it to me’

She pursed her lips, but she could not stay annoyed for long. ‘Is it really my birthday? Is it really my birthday every day?’

‘It is,’ the doctor said.

‘Then I must be the luckiest girl in the world.’

Her mother turned away. Alex looked as if he was going to say something, but Natasha nudged him and he looked at the floor.

‘So the other doctor promised you a present, did he?’

She nodded.

‘The Doctor,’ Father said quietly, looking at the little man, at the new doctor, ‘has given you the best present of all. A gift that we all share in and are the richer for.’

The doctor nodded slowly, then clapped his hands together and took a few steps towards Clio. ‘Yes, well, we shall have to do something about that then, mustn’t we. It must be a thing about doctors,’ he went on, talking as if only he and Clio were there, as if they had been friends for ever. ‘Only, I seem to have forgotten to bring you a present today. So what I’ll do is, for your next birthday, I shall bring you three presents.’

‘Three?’

He smiled. ‘One for your last birthday, from the other doctor, one for this birthday from me. And one for the next birthday.’

‘But that’ll be ages. A whole year.’

‘Oh no, no, no.’ He knelt down beside Clio and put his arm round her shoulder. ‘When you wake up in the morning,’ he said gently, ‘it will be your next birthday. A birthday every day, remember?’ He nodded and smiled to prove it was true.

There were no other guests. Clio played with Alex and Natasha all morning, and then there was a party. But it was just a small party. The presents were nice, but there weren’t very many. The food was good, and the grown-ups drank wine and joined in the games. But they did not seem to be enjoying it much. Perhaps, Clio thought,

she was having too many birthdays. Perhaps if you had too many birthdays they stopped being fun. Father had to keep leaving, his helpers bringing him messages that made him quiet or angry.

'Where is your father, the Archduke?' she asked Natasha when the ice cream came. Clio was sitting between her friends. 'I like him, he makes me laugh with his stories.'

Natasha blinked and frowned. She looked across Clio at Alex. 'He's busy,' she said. 'He had things to do. Important things.'

'More important than my birthday?'

'He's at the war,' Alex said. But as soon as he said it, he looked away, and Natasha was staring at him. 'Well, it's true,' Clio heard Alex mutter.

'Are we having a war?' she asked, confused. But nobody replied.

All too soon it was bed time. Clio said goodnight to everyone and thanked them for coming. Allise took her hand and started to lead her away.

But Clio stopped, turned, looking for the doctor. 'You won't forget,' she called to him 'My presents. Tomorrow.'

He smiled, a small, sad smile. 'I won't forget.'

'You promise?'

'I promise. Sleep well. I shall see you in the morning.'

Clio was tired. It was hard work, having a birthday. Allise tucked her into bed. Then she fussed round the tubes and the wires, and did things to a metal box on a table by the window.

'What are you doing?' Clio asked sleepily.

'Just making sure you get a good sleep,' her nanny replied. 'Good night, princess, see you...' She paused, as if she had forgotten what

she was going to say. ‘Soon,’ she decided. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

Then Allise drew the curtains, and Clio slept. Until her next birthday.

‘Why can’t I wear the dress I wore yesterday?’ Clio wanted to know. The new dress that Allise had shown her was blue. She preferred red.

‘It won’t fit you,’ Allise said as if the question was silly.

‘But it fitted me yesterday.’

For a while, Allise did not answer. Then she said: ‘I like the blue. It goes so well with your eyes. Why don’t you wear it. For me. Just try it on, you’ll look beautiful.’

Allise seemed shorter than she had the day before, Clio thought as she held her nanny’s hand to go downstairs. So did everyone else when she went into the banqueting hall Except Natasha and Alex. They seemed taller - Natasha was up to her mother’s shoulder.

Perhaps that was why Natasha’s mother was so sad. She tried to hide it, but Clio could tell. She watched the woman turn away to dab at her eyes with a hanky. She looked so tired. Maybe Clio should lend her the special bed.

The other person who was taller was the Doctor. Now he was as dignified as a palace courtier, dressed in velvet and wearing a cape. Clio knew who he was from the way he smiled at her when she came into the room. Everyone else seemed to have to remember to smile when they saw her, but not the Doctor. His joy was immediate and complete. He clapped his hands together when Clio entered, and then everyone else clapped too. Allise must be right - the dress made her look beautiful. Clio squeezed her nanny’s hand.

She turned a full circle to let them see the dress properly, delighted at the continued applause.

‘Happy birthday,’ Mother said in her happy-sad voice. Father

nodded and smiled, and looked tired like Natasha and Alex's mother. His jacket seemed to be sagging at the shoulders.

'Anise says my other dress won't fit me,' Clio said. 'But I wore it yesterday, for my last birthday.'

There was silence at this. The applause had stopped and the smiles were frozen.

'Ah, but now you're a year older,' the Doctor said. 'You're seven now. A seven-year-old can't wear the same dress they had when they were six, now, can they? Any more than a butterfly could fit back into its chrysalis.'

He was funny, this new Doctor. He did conjuring tricks - made coins disappear then reappear behind Clio's ear, or on his own tongue. He laughed and drank wine with the grown-ups and they all seemed happier this year. And he had brought the presents.

'I tried to think of things that were appropriate to the giver,' he told Clio as he handed her the three wrapped boxes.

The first present was a brooch. It was large and gold and inset with coloured stones. 'It's a bit big, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said. 'But it will look good on you when you're... older. It's to show that the First Doctor loved you.'

'Father said he gave me a present already,' Clio said as she held the brooch so it caught the light. It reminded her of the slippers, and she was careful not to prick her finger on the pin. 'But I don't know what it was.'

'It was your bed. Your special bed,' her mother told her. 'It was a gift to us all.'

The Doctor's second present was a musical pipe. He showed her how to position her fingers and blow through it to make the notes. For a moment, as she tried to play a tune, he looked sad.

'I'm sorry,' he said, seeing her expression. 'I was just remembering. I

once gave one of these to someone else. Someone I greatly admired. It was the best gift I could have given him, but it wasn't really enough. Sometimes,' he said, looking at Clio's mother, 'you can only do so much. And that can be very sad.'

The third box was empty. 'There's nothing in it,' Clio exclaimed in surprise. 'You forgot the present.'

'Oh no I didn't.' The Doctor sat down beside her, and took one of her hands in both of his. 'You see, the third present is something that is intangible. That means you can't see it, or smell it, or taste it even. But it's there. It's always there.'

'What is it?'

'It's hope.'

Clio looked into the box again, turning it slowly, hoping to catch a quick glimpse of the hope inside. But he was right, she could see nothing. She put the lid carefully back on the box. 'I'll keep it safe, always.'

The Doctor nodded and smiled. 'Good,' he said. 'Because, although it may not always seem like it, while there's life, there's always hope.'

He stood up suddenly, as if embarrassed, and looked round. 'Now, I must find your father and say goodbye.' He was holding something else in his hand now - a metal rod of some sort which he tapped on the palm of his other hand.

'What's that? Is it a magic wand?'

'I suppose so, in a way,' he admitted, amused. 'I was going to have a quick look at your special bed before I go. Ah - there he is.'

Father had come back now, and the Doctor strode across to him. Clio could just hear his words as he called to Father.

'It's time I was going, I'm afraid. But I'll take a quick look at the

stasis generator before I leave. I've an idea that might slow the exponential energy drain. Or at least allow her to move further from the generator when she's awake without hastening the process...'

Alex was talking to her now, so Clio could not hear any more of what the Doctor said. Which was a pity. She liked his voice.

'I'll see you next year,' Alex said. 'Natasha has had to take Mother back to the ship. She's...' He shook his head. 'It's been a bad time.'

'Don't be silly,' Clio told him. 'I'll see you tomorrow. Won't I Anise? I'll see you tomorrow - at my next birthday.'

'Yes,' Alex said. He was looking at Anise, not at Clio. 'That's what I meant. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Clio watched him walk stiffly away. He seemed so tall. He was walking like a soldier now.

'You should say goodnight to your parents,' Anise said. 'It's nearly time for bed.'

It snowed on Clio's eighth birthday. She watched the tiny flakes spiralling down outside the window as the grown-ups talked quietly and drank wine. Alex was not there, nor was his mother. But Natasha had come. She was so tall now.

The Doctor too seemed taller, larger. His face was one huge smile topped by a floppy hat and framed by a multi-coloured scarf. He laughed and joked and gave her jelly babies - a whole big bag of sweets for her present.

By the middle of the afternoon, it was getting dark outside. Clio could see the snow was deep and crisp and unbroken by footprints when she looked out of the window. Just a few days ago, she had to stand on the window seat to peer over the stone sill and see down into the palace courtyard, but now she could see easily without having to climb. It must be because she was eight.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ the Doctor said, surprisingly quietly. ‘So delicate, so soft. So cold.’ He sat down on the window seat so he was almost the same height as Clio.

‘It doesn’t usually snow on my birthday.’

‘But this time your birthday is in winter.’

‘Is that why it’s getting dark now?’

‘It’s been getting dark for a very long time,’ the Doctor murmured.

Then he smiled again, his sudden sadness gone. ‘It’s my fault, I’m afraid. I was a little late for your party, but you waited. You’re very kind.’

‘Did I? Can I go out to play in the snow?’

‘Hmm.’ The Doctor nodded and stared out of the window. ‘I would like to say yes, but I’m afraid I don’t think that would be a good idea. We need to keep you warm and safe indoors, I think. Besides, as you said, it’s getting dark.’

Clio was disappointed, but she tried not to show it. ‘I like the jelly babies,’ she said.

‘They’re my favourite too,’ he confided. ‘Be sure to eat them all up today, won’t you. They won’t be nice when you wake up.’

Natasha hardly spoke to Clio the whole day. She seemed sad, and Clio saw her Mother put an arm round Natasha although they were almost the same height. Clio wanted to talk to Natasha, to ask her what was wrong. But when she asked where Alex was, her friend ran away, her hands to her face. Father hugged Clio, singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to her in a voice that sounded like it came bubbled through water.

As it got darker, a helper came and lit candles. He was the only one of Father’s helpers that Clio saw. She watched as he went round the room with a taper, his hand cupped round it to stop it blowing out

as he moved.

‘Why are we having candles?’ she asked. ‘Is it because it’s my birthday?’

He looked at her as if it was a silly question. But Clio didn’t think it was. ‘Please tell me,’ she said.

‘We have to save energy,’ he said. ‘The generators can barely provide enough to keep -’

But before he could say any more, Mother arrived and told the man to get on with his work. She led Clio back to the table, where the Doctor was waiting. He was leaning back, rocking his chair like Alex’s mother told Alex not to. His feet were up on the table, and Father was listening to his deep booming voice.

‘It’s the starting and stopping that’s the problem, that’s what takes the power,’ he was saying, ‘And of course as the process speeds up as the day goes on, so the energy need increases for the evening. The long night. You may have to consider waiting a while longer, before you next... ‘

His voice stopped abruptly as he saw Clio:

‘It was three years last time,’ Father was saying, but he seemed to be saying it to himself. And we built another two generators. We can’t afford to do that again, it’s taking resources we need at the front.’ He wiped his face with his hands, and he looked so old and tired.

‘Hello there,’ the Doctor said loudly to Clio, whipping his feet off the table and sitting suddenly upright. ‘Have you had a nice birthday?’ Allise was waiting for Clio. It was bedtime, she said. There were lines on her face that Clio had not seen before. Lighter streaks in her fair hair.

Clio had two jelly babies left. A red one and a yellow one. She put the yellow one on the shelf with her books, standing watch over her as she slept. And when Allise wasn’t looking, Clio tucked her last

jelly baby under her pillow. It would sleep soundly there. Until tomorrow. Until her next birthday.

As soon as Allise woke her, Clio slipped her hand under her pillow. The jelly baby was warm and safe, and Clio popped it into her mouth as she climbed out of bed. The room seemed dark, and Allise was standing in the shadows, as if afraid to come into the room.

‘I put out a dress for you,’ she said. Her voice seemed husky and strange. Perhaps she had a cold, Clio thought - it had been winter yesterday.

But this morning the pale rays of the weak sun were scattering light across the bedroom floor. Clio could see specks of dust spiralling down through the light. Everywhere seemed dusty. She could see her footmarks on the floor as she put on her shoes. Except they had shrunk and she could not get her feet into them.

‘They’re waiting for you downstairs,’ Allise said in her cracked voice, and she turned to go before Clio had finished dressing, ‘I’ll see you there.’

‘Please wait for me,’ Clio said. She skipped over to the shelf as she pulled on her dress. It seemed awkward somehow, organising her arms to do what she wanted. The shelf seemed lower than she remembered, but the yellow jelly baby was still there, watching her from beneath a layer of dust. Clio picked it up and blew gently to get the dust off. She should not eat it, she thought, not if it was dusty like that. It was hard and brittle beneath her fingers, and she decided that it might not taste as nice as the red one had. So she put it back beside the fairy tales, and hurried to catch up with Allise.

‘My shoes don’t fit.’

Allise did not answer. She was standing at the top of the stairs. As Clio reached her, she saw that her nanny’s hair was almost white now The woman seemed stooped and bent. Clio tried to stifle a gasp, tried not to show her surprise. Was Allise ill? She seemed so old and so small and fragile. Clio carefully took her hand and

together they walked down the stairs, leaving prints in the dust and avoiding the cobwebs.

There were two soldiers at the bottom of the staircase - one either side. Other soldiers stood by the doors from the hall. They were not Clio's father's men, the uniforms were different. They were like the one Uncle Ferdand used to wear, but with less colour on the sleeves and no medals on the chest.

Father was waiting with Clio's mother. Clio was surprised to see that her mother's hair was grey - almost as white as Allise's had become. Perhaps they had all been ill. Father's hair was white, and brushed in thin wisps across his head.

When Mother hugged Clio, she seemed so fragile and thin Father hugged her too, but it was nothing like the tight bearhug she was expecting. He seemed so weak and drained. When she pulled away, Clio's cheek was wet, and she brushed at it with the back of her hand.

The Doctor was the only person who seemed younger. Natasha was there too, although it took Clio a few moments to recognise her.

'You're so grown-up,' she told her friend. 'How old are we now?'

'You are nine,' Natasha said gently. She smiled, but it seemed a sad smile, 'And I am nineteen.'

Clio shook her head. 'You're four years older than me,' she said. She tried to count it out on her fingers.

'I've had birthdays too,' Natasha said. 'While you've been sleeping.'

'Don't be silly. There aren't enough days. I have a birthday every day.'

'You're probably nearer ten, actually.' The Doctor's voice was gentle and kind. He smiled, looking younger even than Natasha when he did. 'There's no longer a direct correlation, you see, as the process speeds up and the energy demands increase.' His smile seemed to

freeze. ‘I’m sorry, where are my manners. Let me introduce myself.’

‘You’re the Doctor,’ Clio said. ‘I can tell.’

‘You can? Oh well, I suppose that’s a good thing.’

‘Did you bring me a present?’

He seemed confused for a moment. A present?’ He frowned and his eyes widened. ‘Oh, a present, of course. Yes. A present.’ Clio wondered if he had forgotten where he had put it; they both looked round the room. ‘Here,’ the Doctor said at last, and he pulled something from his lapel and handed it to her.

‘What is it?’ It looked like a plant, a vegetable maybe.

‘It’s a stick of celery. You keep it for good luck. Like a rabbit’s foot.’

‘A what?’

‘Yes, well, never mind .You just keep it safe. It will bring you luck.’ Clio thought she heard her father give a short laugh at that. But when she looked, his face was stern.

‘I’ll tell you a secret,’ the Doctor said quietly. He had put on a pair of spectacles, but they seemed only half finished, only the bottom of the lenses was there. He was examining the celery that Clio was holding, ‘That stick of celery,’ he said quietly, ‘doesn’t really exist, you know.’

It felt very real to Clio, but she nodded as if she understood. ‘Is it like the hope you gave me?’ she asked. ‘I still have that safe upstairs in its box, although it’s getting a bit dusty now.’

‘I know the feeling,’ the Doctor murmured. ‘Yes, luck and hope often go together.’

‘I think’, Clio’s mother said quietly as she joined them to look at the celery, ‘that we have none of either.’

The Doctor nodded grimly, then forced a smile. ‘Oh, look on the bright side, there’s always a silver lining.’ He grinned widely. ‘Never say…’ But the grin thinned to a smile, to nothing, as his voice faded away.

There was not much to eat, just bread and cheese. Clio had been waiting to see if Natasha was allowed wine now she was so old, but nobody had any.

‘Why are Cousin Malvek’s soldiers here?’ Clio asked. She did not really want to know, but everyone was so quiet. It was her party, so perhaps it was up to her to make the conversation.

‘They are here to look after us,’ Mother said, glancing at the soldiers by the main doors, then looking quickly away again.

‘To look after me, in particular,’ Father said. He came the closest Clio had seen so far today to a smile. ‘I think the Doctor’s arrival has rather unsettled them.’

‘Yes, I do seem to have that effect sometimes,’ the Doctor agreed.

‘And no doubt there will soon be the usual dire warnings about energy consumption and lists of other crimes and misdemeanours to be accounted for.’

Mother put her hand over Father’s, which was bunched into a fist on the table. Father looked down at it, shook his head. ‘I’m sorry,’ his face said, but he said nothing out loud.

Clio’s birthdays were getting shorter. Anise took her back to her room soon after they had eaten. There were no games, no jokes, no tricks. Just stern faces and silence. She hoped her next birthday would be happier.

‘You said I was nearer ten,’ Clio told the Doctor as he solemnly shook her hand and said good night. ‘How old will I be at my next birthday?’

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it again.

Perhaps he was not sure. He looked at Clio's mother and father. Mother looked away. Father sighed.

'I don't know,' the Doctor said. He seemed to be talking to her parents rather than to Clio. 'But I promise that you will have another birthday. I'll tell you how old you are when you wake up.'

'In the morning? You'll be here?'

He pretended to be hurt. 'Aren't I always?'

She hugged the Doctor, and he seemed the least fragile of all of them. He hugged her back, tight like Father used to. Natasha held her tightly too, but her body seemed to shake as they embraced, and she could not say good night. She just shook her head and looked at the floor as Allise led Clio slowly, haltingly, up the stairs to bed.

The small yellow figure had crumbled. Clio could feel it disintegrating under her fingers as she picked it up. If she blew the dust off it again, she thought, the jelly baby might blow away as well.

And if she blew the dust off Allise, her nanny too might fall apart. The woman was old now, so very old. Her face was lined and her eyes were pale. She walked with the help of a stick.

'How old am I today?' Clio remembered what the Doctor had said. She was taller - much taller than she had been. Her body seemed to have changed shape. It was a strange thing - a few days ago she had been celebrating her fifth birthday, and now...

'It's quite a complex calculation,' the Doctor told her when she met him in the banqueting hall a few minutes later. 'Fortunately for someone of my mathematical expertise it's the matter of only a moment to sort the exponential curve induced by the Senexium Pulverate and then retard that to take account of the temporal suppression field. You have to factor in the energy dissipation of course, and then there's the actual passage of time.'

‘So how old am I this birthday?’

Allise did not answer, and Clio did not ask her again. The celery stick was as fresh and moist as when the Doctor had given it to her yesterday, she noticed. She sniffed at it, but it smelled of nothing. Nothing but the dust and decay that was everywhere.

This Doctor was large and loud. But he seemed as friendly as any of the others. His round face wore an apparently permanent air of confidence while his coat suggested the wit and joy of a jester. It looked as though the scarf he had on her eighth birthday had somehow grown over his whole body. Even his hair was bursting with life. It was a contrast to Mother’s white hair, and her weary, old face. Natasha too looked old and tired. So much must have happened in a night, so much while she slept.

‘Thirteen,’ the Doctor decided. ‘You’re a teenager now, Clio.’ He winked at her theatrically. ‘But no tantrums mind.’

Again it was the Doctor who did most of the talking and joking and laughing. He told Clio outrageous stories about his adventures on other worlds. He explained how clever he had been on so many occasions, and how he had saved worlds and civilisations and people.

‘But not us,’ Mother said quietly, and for the briefest of instants the Doctor’s mood had dropped and his face had darkened as if a storm was about to break.

In the lull that followed, Clio asked: ‘When is Father coming?’ When nobody answered, she said: ‘He never misses my birthdays. I bet he was here for the ones in the night that I missed.’

Natasha sat with her mouth open, like she used to when Alex said something silly. Clio had not seen Alex for several birthdays now ‘Why is everyone going away?’ she wondered.

‘Yes,’ Mother said. ‘Your father has gone away.’

‘Will he be here for my next birthday?’ Clio was sad, but she knew

that Father was busy and important. She knew he would get to her party if he possibly could, and she wondered what could be so urgent that it kept him away.

No one said anything. Until the Doctor suddenly slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. ‘Your present!’ he exclaimed, leaping to his feet.

There was only one soldier by the door for this birthday, and he blinked, startled as the Doctor moved. For a second, Clio wondered what he had at his belt that his hand quickly went to. But the Doctor was already reaching across the table to her - handing her something.

It was a piece of cloth, thick like felt. Black. It was cut into a shape, and Clio held it up to see what it was. The silhouette of an animal - she could see its legs and its body and its head and imagined where its eyes would be.

‘It’s a cat,’ the Doctor explained. ‘A cat that walks always alone. It will watch over you while you sleep. You are very alike, you know.’

‘I am like a cat?’

‘He means you are alone,’ Natasha said. Her voice was hard, but not unkind. Her face was pale and there were dark patches under her eyes. She looked, Clio thought, like Mother had looked on her sixth birthday ‘While you sleep, and life goes on around you and you don’t know about it. Life,’ Natasha said again quietly. ‘And death.’

Clio frowned. She did not understand what Natasha meant, but she said nothing. So many things were confusing her today. Like where her father had gone, and why Mother and Allise were so old; why Natasha was sharp with her, and why the Doctor pretended so hard to be happy and confident when she could see in his eyes the depth of his sadness and his self-doubt. If anyone there walked alone, it was this Doctor.

She was also confused by how her hands could hold the large knife and fork and spoon so comfortably today when only yesterday they

had been too big and heavy. She felt awkward at being so tall as she sat at the table - her eyes almost level with Natasha's now.

But she was grateful for the present, and it came as a surprise to realise that for the past few birthdays the only presents she had been given were from the Doctor. He took her hand and led her upstairs to her bedroom.

'Allise usually puts me to bed,' Clio told him, her Mother's kisses still wet on her cheeks.

'Anise is tired. Soon she will rest too. A long sleep. A very long sleep. The years have taken their toll.'

'You mean the birthdays?'

The Doctor held her hand ever so slightly tighter. 'I mean the birthdays,' he agreed. He raised her hand in his, to her lips, and kissed it like the courtiers used to kiss Mother's hand.

'Why did you do that?' Clio wanted to know as she climbed into bed. The Doctor had turned away while she undressed, which she also thought was strange. 'Why did you kiss my hand?'

'Because you are a princess,' he said. 'And because it is your birthday. And because...' He was fiddling with the controls for the bed, like Allise did every night. 'Goodnight, Clio,' he said, his voice quieter than she had imagined was possible after the bluster and the stories. She closed her eyes, and if she felt the brush of his lips on her cheek kissing her goodnight, then that too was far more gentle than she would have believed of him. But perhaps it was just a breath of air come to hasten her to sleep and to blow away the bad dreams.

The Doctor was still there when she woke, and Clio wondered if she had slept at all. No sooner had she closed her eyes than she seemed to sense the sunlight falling across them, and she was awake again.

She knew she had slept, at least for a while, by the Doctor. Now he was a small man with a strange hat perched on top of his dark hair.

He raised the hat and smiled as he watched her opening her eyes. Then he jammed it back down on his head.

‘Is it morning?’

‘Evening more like. The sun is setting.’

It was not until he said this that Clio realised the sun was shining in through the window on the other side of the room. The light threw shadows across the Doctor’s face. She saw that as he leaned over her, he was resting on a walking stick. The handle was stylised, red. There was material wrapped round the stick, bulking it out.

‘Did Allise find me a nice dress to wear today?’

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And no. She left a dress out for you, but I don’t think it will fit. And Anise isn’t here today.’

‘Not here?’ That couldn’t be right. Allise was always there. Clio could not remember a day ever that Allise had not been there.

The Doctor had turned and was watching the setting sun. ‘No,’ he said quietly, almost mumbling to himself. ‘I’m afraid she had to go away. We all do,’ he added as he turned back. ‘One day.’

‘What will I wear?’ Clio wondered, hoping Allise would be back soon. For her next birthday perhaps.

‘I found a dress in your mother’s wardrobe that I think will fit you. And some other things too.’ He stepped back and pointed to the dress, hanging on the back of the bedroom door. It looked lovely. It looked enormous. Clio gasped.

‘How old am I now?’

‘Well, that’s an interesting question’ He tapped the handle of his stick on his chin for a moment before reaching down the dress and laying it across the bottom of the bed, next to more of her mother’s things - shoes, gloves, underwear. It was pale green, velvet,

beautiful.

‘You get dressed,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ll wait outside.’

‘I can dress myself,’ Clio admitted proudly. She got out of bed. She felt odd, being so big. The Doctor was standing outside the door, and she could hear his voice clearly as she dressed, fumbling with the strange buttons and clasps.

‘You and I are very alike, you know,’ the Doctor was saying. ‘I knew a man - a very dear friend - whose children never tired of asking him how old he was. And he always gave them the same answer.’

‘No one stays the same age for ever,’ Clio said.

That’s very true. But what he always told them when they asked him was: “I’m as old as my tongue, and a little bit older than my teeth.” Which was true of course She heard him chuckle. ‘But not very helpful.’

‘I’m ready now.’

‘You look beautiful.’ He took several moments to admire her, and Clio giggled with embarrassment. ‘But while it was true for him, it wouldn’t be a true answer for me.’

Clio frowned. ‘Have your teeth all gone then?’

‘No.’ He smiled at this. ‘No, they are all my own. But it wouldn’t be a true answer for you either. Not really.’

‘Wouldn’t it?’ She took his hand and they walked together across the dusty landing towards the dusty staircase. Their feet echoed on the marble floor.

‘It depends what you mean by “old” really. Your body is like mine - it’s a different age to your mind. And then the length of elapsed time since you were born, that’s different again. Like me.’

Clio did not understand what he meant, so she just nodded and said

nothing.

‘Time plays tricks on us all,’ the Doctor said quietly as they arrived in the banqueting hall.

It looked like a different room. There was no light except the dying sun filtered through the grimy windows, casting long shadows across the dusty floor. It picked out the cobwebs and the film of dirt on the surfaces. Even the table was covered in dust.

There was an old woman sitting at the table. Her head was buried in her hands, her elbows on the table, her white hair cascading round her so that her face was hidden. When she looked up, she seemed tired and sad. Slowly, falteringly, she got to her feet and shuffled round the table towards Clio and the Doctor. Her chair toppled backwards as she moved, falling with a muffled thud and sending up a shower of dust.

‘Clio, my darling.’ Her voice was cracked and dry and brittle - like her smile Her eyes were pale and almost empty.

It was the dress that Clio recognised - pink, with white roses and a lace collar. ‘That’s my mother’s favourite dress,’ she said, more surprised than accusing.

The old woman paused. She had left trails in the dust where her feet shuffled along. She looked from Clio to the Doctor and back, her eyes brimming.

‘Clio,’ the Doctor said quietly, ‘you remember what I said about the tricks that time plays. Tempus fugit,’ he murmured. ‘This *is* your mother.’

And as soon as he had said it, she could see that it was true. And she cried, and her mother cried, and the Doctor looked like he was about to cry but never quite did. Instead, he reached into his pocket and took out a small bag. When he upended the bag over her waiting hands, her present fell out.

‘The old Doctor sent me a brooch,’ she told him. ‘The very first

Doctor, who gave me the special bed. He sent it with one of the other Doctors.' But the brooch which this Doctor had given her was much smaller. White plastic in the shape of a shield. There was a blue design on it, but Clio did not know what it was supposed to be.

'It's a ship,' the Doctor said. Seeing her surprise, he explained. 'Not a ship like you know. One that goes on water, rather than between the planets.'

'On water?'

He helped her pin it on her dress. 'It belonged to a friend of mine.'
'The one with his own teeth?'

'Another friend. A young lady. Like you. But she said she didn't need it any more and that you should have it. She said to tell you that you had deserved it. It's a badge really, not a brooch. It's only given to people who are very special. Very brave.'

'Am I very special and very brave?'

The Doctor stepped back to admire the badge-brooch. 'You'd better ask your mother,' he said. But Mother was still crying softly, trying to smile through the tears.

'You're all grown-up,' she said. 'My little girl, grown-up at last. I've waited so long.'

Which seemed strange to Clio, who had grown up so very quickly.

Nobody else came to the party. The sun dipped out of sight and the Doctor lit the only candle. Its flickering light helped them see their way back up to the bedroom. It was a slow journey, as Mother had to hold the Doctor's and Clio's arms for support and let them help her up the stairs.

'Keep the dress on,' Mother said. 'And your brooch.'

'It's a badge,' Clio told her. 'The Doctor said so.'

‘Your badge then,’ She tried to smile. ‘It will be morning soon. No point in wasting time getting undressed.’ She turned to the Doctor, took his arm and led him a step or two away from the bed.

‘Just once more. Can’t we? Once more before the power finally...’

But the Doctor was shaking his head sadly. His voice was barely a whisper in the near-darkness. ‘If she wakes again, there will be no power to restabilise the fields. I’m sorry.’

Mother looked at him for a while. The she shuffled back to the bed, where Clio was waiting, her arms out to embrace her mother, kiss her good night one last time.

‘Good night, my darling.’

‘Good night, Mother. I love you.’

‘Sweet dreams,’ Mother said. But her words were almost swallowed by the threat of tears.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ Clio assured her. She did not like to see Mother so sad. ‘Anise will be back then. And Father. And the others.’ Perhaps her mother answered. Clio did not know. Her eyes began to close, and somewhere in the distance the Doctor blew out the candle.

‘Let me tell you a story,’ the Doctor said as he led her to the door. ‘Does it have a happy ending?’ Clio wanted to know.

‘In a way.’

‘I like stories with happy endings.’ The dress still fitted her, Clio

was surprised to find. Perhaps, as Mother had said, she had only slept a short while and not missed any more birthdays. Wait a minute: She ran to check her hope was still in its box on the bookcase. It was smothered in dust but the small box was there.

‘Once upon a time,’ the Doctor said. They were on the landing now.

‘All the best stories start like that,’ he told her in a low voice. In his storytelling voice he went on: ‘There was a princess.’

The stairs were layered with dust, so that it puffed up at their feet as they walked. The carpet had shredded almost to nothing.

‘And this princess was unlucky enough to prick her finger on a brooch, and so she went to sleep for a thousand years.’

Clio giggled, but it sounded more like a grown-up laughing, ‘That’s silly,’ she said. ‘Nobody sleeps for a thousand years.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Maybe it was a million.’

‘All right.’

‘Anyway, her family didn’t want her to sleep, they wanted her to wake up. But she was under a spell that would kill her if she didn’t sleep. So to stop her dying they attached a spinning wheel to her bed, to stop the spell.’

‘A spinning wheel?’

‘It’s just a story.’

The banqueting hall seemed to be empty. There was no sound from downstairs, just the muffled tread of their feet in the dust.

‘Anyway, they could not keep stopping and starting the spinning wheel or the bobbin would wear out.’

‘What’s a bobbin?’

‘It’s the bit that would wear out.’

‘So what did they do.’

‘Well, they woke her once or twice, when they could. But after a while it was less and less until they could no longer wake her up at

all.'

'And what happened then?'

Clio was wrong. There *was* someone in the room. Sitting at the table, head slumped forward. A woman in a faded, dusty dress that might once have been pink. As Clio approached she could see a faint tracery of lines - like branches - that covered the dress. And she could see what might once have been white roses but they had turned deathly pale and withered in the pattern. The lace that had trimmed the collar was frayed and fractured, so it looked like tiny brittle broken bones. And inside the dress...

She could guess. 'They all died, didn't they?'

The Doctor gently led her away from the table, towards the door. 'I'm afraid they did.' He was a younger Doctor this time. His face was long, but not unhappy. He looked used to smiling. His hair was bouncing with life and his voice had a soft edge to it.

'So what happened? To the princess? In the story?'

'Well... ' He seemed to think about this, hesitating in the doorway,

'There was one person who did not die.'

Clio clapped her hands together. 'A prince.'

'If you like.'

'Was he handsome?'

The Doctor seemed surprised at the question. 'Well, I suppose he was. In a way. Yes.'

'What did the handsome prince do?'

'He made a choice. That may not sound very heroic, but it is the most important thing that princes do. And the hardest. He had to decide whether to let the princess - who was very beautiful, by the

way, did I say that? He had to decide whether to let her sleep forever, or to wake her up. But he knew that if he woke her, the spinning wheel would stop forever... ‘

She listened, mouth open attentive. ‘The bobbin would break?’

He nodded, ‘And there was no one left to repair it or find a new one. But the prince, he decided to wake her anyway.’

They crossed the courtyard, towards the main gates. One of them was slightly open. The other was rotted and had begun to collapse.

‘So the prince went to the castle where the princess was sleeping. But because of a fault in his horse’s, er, navigational systems, he arrived *outside* the castle, not inside. And he found that a huge forest had grown up in the years she had slept. So he took his sword and although it was a bit rusty and he was a bit out of practice, he hacked his way through the trees until he found the castle.’

Clio followed the Doctor out through the gate. She had not been outside the castle before. Not ever. She rested her hand on the cold stone of the gateway as she went through. It looked like someone else’s hand -the blue veins just visible beneath the smooth surface, the nails long and elegant...

Outside there was a wood - trees growing closely together, their branches intertwined and overlapping. Every now and again Clio could see small white roses peeping through the foliage, and she was careful not to prick herself on the thorns as she followed the Doctor.

There was a narrow path through the wood. He was waiting for her, and when she reached him, Clio could see that there were other paths through the wood too.

‘They don’t really go anywhere,’ the Doctor told her. ‘I think whoever cut them was a bit lost. Or perhaps they were not really sure they wanted to reach the castle after all.’

‘Can I run and play?’

His smile almost swallowed his face. ‘Of course you can. That’s what the wood is for.’

‘We mustn’t run indoors.’

‘But now we’re outdoors. We can run and skip and shout for joy and play hide and seek.’

‘Can’t catch me,’ she shrieked, and was off.

The Doctor ran after her, but he wasn’t really trying. He let her win every time. Until she was out of breath and the smooth skin on the back of her hand was slack and lined.

‘So why did the prince wake her up?’ They were walking slowly along the path. The Doctor was pulling petals from a rose, one by one, dropping them like snowflakes to the ground.

‘He thought very long and very hard about just letting her sleep, about sparing her the pain and the knowledge. He let her sleep while civilisations came and went, while empires rose and fell. Until all the birthdays and parties were over.’ The rose was just a green stem now, a single thorn jutting out from its side. ‘But then he thought about what she was missing - not the passage of history, but her own life. He thought about how she should be able to run and skip and shout for joy and play hide and seek. For once.’ He was smiling, twisting the rose stem in his fingers. But it was a less of a smile now. ‘For last.’

Clio ran on ahead, laughing again, catching hold of a slender tree trunk and twirling round it, her dress billowing out in joy.

‘He thought of her just lying there, slowly but surely getting older day by day, and he thought of his own day by day life.’

She ran up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, running off as he swung round and tried to catch her.

‘He decided, I suppose, that you have to live life to the fullest you

can, not just sit back and let it all go by. You need to be out there doing it, not stuck indoors, watching it. That's why.'

She skipped on ahead through the forest. But her feet were heavy and she was feeling tired. Her fingernails had broken on the trees and her hands were blotched and weak and wrinkled.

'It's about having the choice. About doing what's right. About enjoying yourself. Enjoying life.'

There was a but at the end of the path. She was making her way there through the trees, ducking behind them and jumping out at the Doctor. But it was an effort now. She took his hands in hers and let him swing her round.

'Ring a ring a roses,' he sang, his eyes bright and damp.

'A pocket full of posies.' The trees flashed past, and she could feel herself sagging in his grasp.

'A-tissue, a-tissue.' She tried to speak, to tell him how much fun she was having - how this was the best present of all, ever. But her voice was a dry croak, like her Mother's had been that last time.

'We all fall down.' And she slumped to the floor, her dress spreading round her.

They were almost at the but now, and the Doctor scooped Clio up as if she was a little girl again, as if she was just five. As he did so, just for a frozen instant, she thought she caught sight of her mother reflected in the moisture of his eyes - an old, lined face. Smiling, but tired. Trembling and frail.

'Sweet dreams, Clio,' the Doctor said quietly, and he bent to kiss her. The last thing she heard, as she slipped into sleep, was a wounded animal somewhere in the distance, howling with pain. And the last thing she felt was the warm damp rain on her face. As her handsome prince kissed Clio good night.

Short Trips: Steel Skies

Steel Skies and Life Science (Short Trips seven) were commissioned as a joint venture, which allowed me to use a broader range of writers across the two books. The process of receiving pitches for stories and discussing them with the writers is one of my favourite parts of the job, one aspect of which is to make sure that there's a reasonably representative spread of Doctor/companion teams in each book. Sometimes, that means asking a writer to rework their story for different characters. For these two, something about their SF flavour I think inspired no less than five writers to send me promising story ideas set in the late Fifth, early Sixth Doctor's eras - in other words, featuring Peri. Rather than ask some of them to rewrite for someone else, I decided we would go with the flow and make the stories work as a set, joining the writers in an email discussion about common themes and threads.

The result is a very loose but discernible arc, tracking Peri's journey from joining the Doctor to her decision - glossed over on television - to stay with him and not return home. In Steel Skies, Mark Wright's Light at the End of the Tunnel and Jeremy Daw's House deal with the early part of her stay in the TARDIS and her uncertainty about whether to remain. Ruins *of Heaven* is set a little later (just after Revelation *of* the Daleks), with a more settled-in Peri capable of having, in effect, her own adventure and of beginning to tame the often disagreeable Sixth Doctor. It also plays on the imagery and mythology of angels, as Marc did so effectively in his TV serial, Ghost Light.

John Binns

The Ruins of Heaven
Marc Platt

‘If this is Heaven,’ said Peri when they first arrived, ‘which way are all the dead people?’

‘Dead people?’ The Doctor eyed the Tourist Information map warily. ‘That could be embarrassing.’

The map made no mention of the dearly departed. Instead, it announced in rich thespian tones: ‘*Heaven, this particular Heaven, since there are several disputed sites, is located on Sheol, the single inhabited world circling the star Achshaph in the Ramshorn.’*

‘Sir John Gielgud,’ observed the Doctor. ‘He’ll never be short of work.’

‘Renowned for its religious antiquities and miraculous architecture, Heaven is also famed for its markets, health spa, and historic Gates of Pearl shrine. Attracting cure-seekers and shoppers from all over the galaxy, Heaven makes the ideal stop-off en route to the Pleasure Domes and star-soaked beaches of Old Xanadu or the Blessed Clouds of Gideon. Sponsored by Bluebliss Holidays, Inc. ‘

‘Great,’ said Peri. ‘Looks like the angels have moved out.’

The Doctor sniffed disapprovingly. ‘And the marketing moguls have moved in.’

Heaven wasn’t warm so they’d taken their coats. But not as cold as Hell, as the guide had pointed out. That was before she’d stomped off in a fit of pique.

This time the Doctor had really done it. He and Peri had tagged along behind the party of tourists, which had seemed like a great idea: Peri’s idea, in fact; anything to get a break from the Doctor’s demonstrative opinions. But they’d hardly reached the end of the first block on Paradise Prospekt before he started complaining.

First, he called for the tour guide to speak up, insisting those at the back couldn't hear. Several of the party agreed, which only encouraged him. The guide, a young woman kilted out as a sort of hermit with a flowing silver beard and sackcloth robes, carried *a* rough-hewn staff with a red parasol perched on top. Her name badge called her St Albans. She eyed Peri and the Doctor with saintly irritation, before resuming her commentary.

All the way along the route, past rococo facades of crumbling magnificence, over little bridges spanning canals filled not with water but cloud, across cloistered piazzas where market stalls sold the unimaginable, all the Doctor did was criticise. This date was wrong; that fact was spurious; the place was festering in a tide of commercial hyperbole; they'd have got a far better view if they'd turned left at the last *trivium.*

'Quiet,' muttered Peri, but the Doctor had that pursed-lip look of determined indignation that shed grown to realise always meant trouble She met the guides glare with a feeble smile, and tried to look interested. The perpetual smell ofincense was starting to make her feel sick.

Just ahead, there was another band oftourists with another guide Most of them were neither young nor human; all of them seemed to be ignoring the commentary and looking for photo opportunities. And behind, there was yet another group and Peri could hear their guide reciting the same commentary that St Albans had reeled offto them only three minutes before. She was trapped on a treadmill.

They were mounting the steps of the cobalt blue Palace of Ethereal Wisdom (apparently in the Raeonese style), when St Albans turned and flung out an expansive arm towards the view behind them 'Behold the City ofHeaven,' she cried.

The city was mountainous, stretching ever upwards: palace upon palace, temple upon temple, lit in the hues of an eternal dawn, their foundations set in cloud. Gold and silver glinted on the domes. A flock of tiny pink birds soared fax above, and were lost in the haze. The group let out a collective sigh of satisfaction.

‘Shame about the high-rise hotels,’ muttered Peri. And she nodded towards a duster of tower blocks stacked up on the eastern horizon.

‘Suburbs,’ observed the Doctor sourly ‘Heaven, the *real* Heaven, is just an ideal. A comforting pipe dream. Not like this at all.’ There was a gasp of shock from the group. The Doctor was being too loud again.

‘Doctor, shut up!’ And then Peri realised that he was actually addressing their fellow tourists, most of whose jaws were dropping in disbelief. ‘This place is a fantasy. It’s just pretend.’

Peri prayed for the steps to open up and swallow her whole. ‘Keep your voice down. It’s like shouting in church...’

‘I have total respect for people’s faiths, Peri. But this so-called Heaven is not what it purports to be. It’s a cheap theme park imitation based on the Baroque school, without any hint of artistic restraint or taste!’

Laughter echoed up from the piazza below. A seven-foot-high cherub with golden curls, its rubbery features exaggerated and cartoon-like, was shaking hands with tourists. It turned and waved up at them, a cute smile on its chubby face. It reminded Peri of someone, but she couldn’t think whom.

Sir? Are you with Ambrosial Tours?’ St Albans had come right up to them.

‘No,’ said Peri quickly. ‘We just tagged along. It’s erm... interesting.’

‘It’s a fraud,’ declared the Doctor.

‘A fraud?’ St Albans’s tone was glacial. ‘Do you have your entry visas?’

‘Visas? I thought the Kingdom of Heaven was open to all.’

Peri cringed under the scrutiny of the other tourists. *Oh God,* she prayed to no avail. *Please, PLEASE make him shut up!*

It just got worse. The Doctor knew that he was now the centre of attention and, naturally, loved it. ‘You see, most of what you have told us about this city has either been unfounded or untrue: He patted St Albans’s hand reassuringly ‘Don’t worry my dear, I realise your commentary was written by somebody else. I couldn’t possibly hold you responsible for its wilful inaccuracy. As for this place? Well, I’ve seen holier sieves.’

St Albans shook her beard in disbelief. ‘The City of Heaven was founded at the start of the Third Epoch by the Levitican Fathers, they who discovered the Gates of Pearl on their pilgrimage to the Blessed Clouds in the Constellation of Gideon. We’ll have a chance to visit and pass through the Gates themselves in the Parc des Portes after lunch - queues permitting.’

‘Oh, please!’ spluttered the Doctor. ‘Those gates were purely ceremonial. Clearly left over from some earlier and long-vanished civilisation. The Fathers have misinterpreted their significance.’

‘Say, bud,’ interjected one of the tourists, a turtleheaded guy in a tartan shirt, ‘if you know so much, maybe you should take over the tour.’

Peri bit her tongue. The Doctor waved his arms in a fit of modesty ‘Oh, no. No, no, no, I couldn’t possibly.’

‘Please do,’ snapped St Albans, clearly incensed. ‘After all, who am I? Just a mere volunteer.’

‘You mean you don’t even get paid?’

‘We have the conviction of our belief,’ said the guide and thrust her staff with the red umbrella into the Doctor’s hand. ‘Let’s see where scepticism gets you. ‘And she stalked away down the steps. ‘No!’ called the Doctor. ‘Please wait. I didn’t mean...’ But he was left in the centre of a mob of angry tourists.

That was when Peri had had enough too. ‘Sorry, Doctor,’ she shrugged. ‘I’m going to do some exploring on my own. See you

later... back at the TARDIS.' She didn't need to see his open-mouthed exasperation. She just heard his little gasp of helpless astonishment behind her as she headed down the steps and across the sunny piana.

'Peri! Be careful!'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah...' But she hadn't gone far down the steps before she had to suppress a smile. She suddenly knew who the huge golden-curled cherub with its goofy walk and silly wave had reminded her of.

She was finally starting to come to terms with the Doctor's eccentricities - well, some of them anyhow. Not only did he have an extraordinary ability to avert terrible disasters, he could cause them as well. As much as fighting villains and monsters, he was often fighting himself. The bluster was just on the surface. Deep down, the goodness in him was innate.

It was just that once in a while, just for once, it would be really great to know something that the Doctor didn't. Or at least, that he didn't admit to knowing. It didn't have to be anything universe-shattering: just something that was hers, not his, no matter how small. Just occasionally, she wanted not to be just the sidekick. 'That's an awful lot of justs,' she could hear him saying.

And deep and dark inside herself, she felt a gnawing guilt - an awareness that the Doctor had once given one of his lives so that she didn't die. And it had changed him forever. However impossible he'd become, she owed him so much. She felt sorry for him and thought she'd buy him an ice cream to atone.

She heard a flutter of wings and something chuckled behind her. The wordless voice of a baby. But when she turned, there was no one near. In the distance, the Doctor was leading his group of disciples up the steps into the blue palace. Better hurry, Doctor. The next tour on the treadmill was already shuffling past Peri. It would soon catch him up.

At the bottom of her shoulder bag, Peri found an old pair of

sunglasses and put them on, immediately feeling more at home as a tourist.

And then she remembered the watch. The golden fob watch and chain that he'd worn in his waistcoat, that she'd trodden on as he'd heaved her over a wall on the planet Necros. He'd placed it in a

folded velvet cloth with a look of melancholy reverence and left it in a box in his workshop. Once he'd gone off to tinker elsewhere, she'd slipped it into her bag in the vain hope of finding somewhere to get it mended.

As she crossed the square, heading back to the market, a sign on one of the pillars caught her attention.

DO NOT FEED THE PUTTI
MINIMUM PENALTY: 10 PUBLIC GENUFLEXIONS

Peri squinted to decipher what someone had scrawled across the bottom of the sign. Something like *Only The Dead Sea... Ankles.* She wasn't sure what a putti was or what the Dead Sea or ankles had to do with it.

The market was amazing Everywhere there were souvenirs, mass-produced models of cathedrals and palaces and pearly gates, all brightly painted. Angel dolls and angel books, hermit dolls and action saints, sandals, tee-shirts and robes. *My boyfriend went to Heaven and all I got was this lousy vestment.* Luscious fruit, vegetables, loaves, fishes. Local produced manna. Nothing was priced. And if she got too close or looked too interested, all the stall-holders would say was 'how much?'

Peri began to feel uncomfortable about it all. She wasn't sure who was selling. Them or her? And there was nowhere you could get a broken watch mended. It was getting hot. The smell of incense never went away and all along the tops of the stalls, there were lines of plastic spikes to stop the birds from landing.

The further in she went, the more nervous she got. *I'm not so easily shocked,* she thought, but there were things that had no place here.

Not in Heaven. Not even in Heaven's suburbs. Cruelly angular implements, all rusting - souvenirs of the Inquisition. Bars and clubs with darkened doorways, through which she glimpsed scantily clad figures and heard exotic music, or the clatter of the gaining table. Neon signs for *The Flesh* and *The Pleasures.* Dancers dressed as hellish creatures from paintings by Hieronymous Bosch - or at least, she *hoped* they were in costume. Stall-holders reached towards her, rubbing their grubby fingers, winking their grubby eyes, making her feel dirty too. A sign above a stall offered *The Souls ofMen.* And another, *Instant Salvation Certificates Now (No Questions Asked).* Everything was on sale here, and that included her.

She rounded another corner and saw the huge entrance to a church basilica rising above the market stalls. Solid and ancient, its great wooden doors were open, guarded by stone saints in attitudes of devotion. She hurried for sanctuary. Inside, the service was just starting, so she took a back pew, relieved at the chance to get her head back together.

It was cool inside. Vaults of stone rose in dean lines above her and anthems from the choir soared up through them on clouds of incense, tangibly mingling with the rainbow light that fell in shafts from the coloured windows. Peri felt the weight lift from her shoulders. It was comforting here. She thought of church-going at home when she was a kid, although she'd always had to be frog-marched to that. And Sunday church in Baltimore had always been more of a social than a religious event. Not grand like here, where worship was turned into High Art. The sermon at home was the penance you sat through before you got to go out and play, or went to McDonald's for lunch. These days, sermons from the Doctor were a daily event. She was having doubts already.

This Heaven, whatever it had become, was an Earthbound place. An exclusively Westernised place, filled with the trappings of an idealised Catholicism and Protestantism. The Doctor was right. It wasn't truthful. This was Heaven World, manufactured and commercialised. It was a parade, already tainted with the earthly greeds of humanity. Other faiths had Heaven too. So where were they? Were there other segregated Heavens elsewhere? Maybe the only real Heaven was in your head.

All around, the congregation of alien tourists were kneeling to pray. But try as Peri did, no prayer would come into her head. The well-worn hassock was hard on her knees. So where were all the dead souls? If this was real Heaven, she might meet her grandma again, or Jodie Blauberg, her friend who'd died in a car crash when she was fourteen, or Abraham Lincoln. And she might even find the Doctor here, her first Doctor, the tall, handsome, apologetic Doctor who had died for her.

It was no good. Her faith was internal, not of the organised outward variety. The incense and vaulting anthems stifled it. She stood up, ignoring the collection plate and left the church in mid- hymn.

It was even hotter outside. She skirted the side of the market until she reached a wide-open park of brown grass, where a sign announced that she had reached the Elysian Fields Litter scuttered across it in the breeze. A long line ofpeople was processing across the parkland. One white wheelchair after another, each pushed by a uniformed nurse, each containing a patient wrapped in shawls or blankets, some alert, some lolling, some human. All apparently seeking a miracle cure in this place... Peri hesitated to call it *holy,* but despite all the commercial trappings, there was still evidence of faith. Maybe this Heaven could provide the sick or dying with a remedy, divine or otherwise, that their doctors could not.

Overhead, the huge sky billowed with mountainous clouds, palaces and courtesy coaches. The flock of pink birds flickered high up across the sun. And what Peri saw next brought her up short.

Across the park, two angels were hovering just above a crowd of tourists. Huge eagle wings carried them, striking majestically back and forth with regal power. Their robes ofdark gold swirled around them defying the laws of gravity. Peri just stood open-mouthed. It was all true. Heaven did exist, and she was there. She felt her eyes moisten at the glory of the two ethereal creatures.

Then one of them swooped, picked up one of the tourists in its arms and lifted him aloft. The boy waved as his baseball cap fell off, posing with the grinning angels for the rest of his family to take

photos. ‘Hi Mom, look at me and the fairy!’ When they were done, the angel lowered him to the ground and scooped up another. More posing, more pictures. To the side, another ‘hermit’ was taking money for the privilege of an angelic flight. ‘Come in now, Raphael,’ he shouted. ‘Your anti-gray’s due for recharging.’

Peri found she couldn’t hate the place. It was all too human. Incense mingled with the smell of frying burgers, like Coney Island with religious overtones. But she’d had enough; she was going back to the TARDIS.

She started back along Paradise Prospekt, pushing her way through the crowds until she reached a courtyard where the time machine was parked. The police box was still there, but there was no sign of the Doctor. Typical, she thought. She’d probably land up having to bail him out ofjail for upsetting tourists. She sat on a bench and waited, drawing lines in the hot dust with her shoe.

After a moment, she heard the chuckle of the child again and something fluttered close, skimming her head. She struggled to her feet in pain, staring round angrily. On top of the TARDIS sat a small pink baby. It was naked, with little ice-grey wings sprouting from behind its shoulders. Straight out of a painting. Golden hair, blue eyes, and a lop-sided smirk on its face.

Warily, Peri returned its stare. ‘Hello. What do you want?’

The cherub cocked his head on one side in a provocatively impudent manner.

Peri felt something trickling through her hair. She put her hand and got blood on her fingers. The cherub gave another little chuckle, which was answered from down beside Peri’s leg. A second cherub had landed on her shoulder bag, and was rummaging through the contents.

Peri yelled and struck out at the infant angel. He fluttered up into the air, pulling her precious silk scarf with him and furling it to and fro just above her head. ‘Hey, quit that! Just grow up, will you! Give me that back!’ She lunged helplessly and then snatched up her

bag, clutching it tight. The cherub reeked of incense.

Peri turned back to the TARDIS. Six of the creatures were now sitting along its roof, with one more lounging against the top light. Another fluttered down and joined him They were exchanging chuckles amongst themselves - clearly sizing her up as they studied her with cornflower-coloured eyes.

‘What do you want? I don’t have anything for you!’ The blood ran into Peri’s eye and stung. She turned to run back to the safety of the crowds on the Prospekt, but another cherub flew in her face, swooping wildly in front of her, forcing her back towards the TARDIS. The heady vapour from its wings choked her.

The crowd from the police box roof now numbered over a dozen or more of the little naked monsters, and had spilled down to the courtyard surrounding it. Peri faltered, unable to find an escape route. As the cherub behind her dive-bombed again, the others rose up, flying around her in a crowd. She stumbled past the ship, heading along a thin alley with cherubs pinching and pulling at her clothes with chubby little fingers. She tried to turn left, but they blocked her path, driving her forward. She was running blind, only the beating of a flock of wings and the gleeful chuckling of the bloodthirsty little vermin filling her head. Then they were in front of her too, and she fell back against the wall. Nowhere to go. Nausea from the incense turned her stomach. She swung out uselessly with her bag as they closed in. She doubled over, falling against rough splintering wood. The door gave under her weight. She tumbled sideways into darkness and several seconds’ drop before hitting the floor.

Peri lay for an age waiting for the pain to start. It was quiet. Far above her, the white shape of the broken door had been torn all jagged from the darkness into which she’d fallen.

Nothing stirred. No sign of the cherubs. And the overpowering stench of the incense had lifted. She guessed shed have problems finding a way out of here, but it was warm and surprisingly comfortable in the dark. The warmth fitted snugly round her. No need to move. No need to do anything. No one’s looking. Just

another half hour.

‘Perpugilliam Brown. Just look at the state of you. Get up now.’ For a moment she saw how absurd she must look lying there on the floor, gathering dust like a dropped doll. How long had she been there? People would be looking for her. People at home had probably been looking for years. Lost at sea. Presumed dead. One day she’d be late for her own funeral. So get up now!

Okay, okay. No need to get all teachery with herself. She didn’t have an essay to hand in.

It took a real effort to haul herself up out of the warm. She still felt light-headed, but that was only to be expected. She’d had a shock after all. The place was big, like a warehouse. Around her stood large box shapes like crates, but they weren’t solid. They were barred with metal. They gleamed dully in the light from the broken door above. The crates were cages, like the old-style wagons that used to carry circus animals. She edged round one and peered into the gloom inside, relieved to find it long unoccupied. There was a sign on the bars of another: **MANTICORES. HANDLERS MUST WEAR PROTECTIVE ARMOUR** And further on: **WINGED LIONS. DO NOT FEED.** But there was nothing except old sawdust on the floor and hard steel roofs.

Something glinted by her foot. She stooped and picked up a golden feather. It weighed heavily enough to be real metal, but it gave off a pale glow. She studied its intricate formation, astonished by the artistry and skill that had fashioned it, guessing that it was from one of the lions. It couldn’t be real. It was all for show, another part of the Disney-style parade.

But the feather was beautiful and strangely real. When she held it up, it lit her way into the darker corners. Round the warehouse she went, but the only door she found was metal and had no handle or lock. And there was no sign of any ladder she could use to reach the broken door.

The cages, all empty, filled the space. Nothing but a maze of cages. ‘Oh, come on,’ she prayed. ‘Please, just get me out of here!’ She had

begun to retrace her path, guided by the glow of the feather, when she heard movement: something shifting slightly. It came from a cage in the darkest corner. Unlike the other cages, it was bent and crumpled. Its roofwas beaten down at the edges, so that the inside was enclosed and hidden.

Peri shielded the feather for a moment. There was a glimmer coming from inside the battered cage. ‘Hello?’ she called.

Silence. Then the briefest rustle.

‘Hello? Is somebody there?’

Further silence. And then, ‘No’ the voice was neither male nor female.

Just a voice inside the cage.

‘I’m lost,’ stuttered Peri. ‘Is there some way out of here?’

‘No!’

‘Oh, come on. Please. There must be a way out. Can’t you just tell me?’

‘No. I neither help nor exist.’

‘For God’s sake,’ complained Peri to herself.

‘Stop it! Stop that now! I’ve had enough of that. The constant drone is bad enough without you actually turning up on the doorstep in person.’ The vehemence of the outburst astonished Peri.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘If I could just get out then you’d be left alone again.’

There was another silence. She crouched and squinted through the gap between the floor and the lip of the battered-down roof.

A slender creature was sitting bunched up in the farthest corner of

the cage, its arms hugging its long legs. Its naked skin had a glimmering sheen that lit the inside of its tiny prison. It was not simply human-like Human was just a start. It was far more than that. More than just woman or man, something that humans could only dream of aspiring to be. But its shoulder-length hair, golden like shot silk, was matted with filthy straw. It quickly turned its face away, but its eyes soon led back to her. Huge, frantic eyes in a face that was unbelievably, unbearably beautiful. So beautiful that it was hard to look at directly. Peri decided, despite the lack ofany visible evidence, to think of the creature as a He.

'Don't look. Don't look!'

'Sorry,' said Peri again. She felt totally insignificant in his presence.

The creature was shaking with fear. His eyes turned to look at her and she was lost in their depths. 'Can you see me?' he asked as if he could scarcely believe it.

'You're beautiful,' Peri whispered.

The creature gave a long sigh and his shoulders sank. 'Oh, poor soul.'

'Who? Me or you? Just... Please; I just want to get out of here.' She faltered. 'Sorry, that's an awful lot of justs,' she mumbled.

He shook its head. 'It's a lot of sorrier too.' His eyes stared fixedly at the floor. 'But that's the first thing people always say'

'What?'

'And was the world still as vile and corrupt when you left it?' The depths of those eyes again. They were full of sorrow. 'Who sent you over? As if I couldn't guess.'

'No one. No one sent me. I was attacked. A load of horrible things came after me. Like flying babies. But that's crazy, isn't it?'

'Putti?' The androgynous creature looked very alarmed.

‘What? I don’t know. What are putti? These were like the cherubs you see in paintings.’

‘What did *they* want with you?’

‘I was waiting for a friend and they just flew in. I had to run. That’s when I fell in here.’

‘It was an accident. Not deliberate.’ He sounded defensive.

Peri started to clamber under the lip of the roof. ‘I don’t know what you mean. Are you stuck in here too?’

He pulled back and threw out a hand. ‘Go away!’

‘I can’t!’ She stopped herself, hearing the panic. She took a deep breath. ‘My name is Peri.’

He sighed again. ‘Poor sweet soul; I’m sorry too. Your name is Perpugilliam Brown from Baltimore, United States of America, Earth… ‘

‘And you can stop right there.’ A real anger blazed up in her. ‘I don’t want you in my head! Whoever you are.’

‘In *your* head? What about *my* head? Do I have any choice?’ The creature’s hands went up to press against its temples. The skin of his slender fingers was all stained with rainbow colour, as if he’d dabbled them in paint or dye. He made whimpering noises and was trembling.

Peri pulled herself further into the cage. ‘Look, I’m sorry. What can I do to help?’

The creature was pressing itself against the back wall.

‘You know who I am. You must have a name too.’

He winced and gave a little cry. ‘There are fifteen million, ninety-

one thousand, eight hundred and fifty-two people on Skopta Maxima praying for deliverance from invading swarms of scissor bugs. There are three thousand, four hundred and thirty-six people on the Marches of Graeae Four giving thanks for the rain that saved their crops. There are eleven thousand, four hundred and sixteen people on Earth praying for the rain to hold off to save their Test Match... '

'Stop it!' said Peri. 'You're making it up:

'You don't have to listen to it,' he snapped. 'What about the woman on Mars Colony praying for her father not to die of cancer? Or the man on a space shuttle praying that his wife doesn't find a love letter in his jacket from his boyfriend... '

'How can you know?'

'I hear them. All the prayers at every moment. We all do.'

She studied him hard. 'Are you some sort of angel?'

'What about the woman on Androzani Minor praying for the man in the mask not to touch her? Or the same woman trapped in a ventilation shaft on N'Tia, praying to be sent back home? Or that same woman standing on the steps of the palace on Sheol, who prayed for her friend to shut up? Or just now, praying to get out of the dark warehouse?'

He heard that, thought Peri. He overheard *all* that. 'Those were private. Who gave you the right to listen in?'

'All prayers have an address on them,' said the creature.

'So what does that make you? God's private secretary?' She pulled away from the edge of the cage. 'I don't have to stay here. I'll find my own way out.'

His voice called in desperation to her from his prison. 'You don't understand. It was an accident. Don't go and look! Come back!' But she held up the golden feather, using it to find her way between the

cages towards the falling light from the broken door.

She stopped as she reached the place. Something heavy was lying on the floor below the door. Splintered wood was scattered around it, and there was a shoulder bag with its contents spilling out. The shape lay at an awkward angle. It didn't move. It was wearing her coat.

Peri stood for minutes, staring down at her broken body, lying where she'd left it, unable to make any sense of the reactions and thoughts cannoning round her head

Oh, God, please make Mom be all right. Please make the Doctor be all right. I never said I was sorry to him. I never finished my botanical studies. This isn't right. There are so many things I haven't done yet. It can't be right. I never got back from vacation. Who's going to water the plants now?

And then, What am I doing here? IfI'm dead, why isn't there a tunnel with light at the end of it?And the only answer she could think of was, Because I'm in Heaven already.

She looked up. A child's head was framed in the gash of light where the door had been. It made a chuckling noise and a second head joined it to stare down at her. They were waiting. It was no accident. She turned and went back into the dark, holding her feather in front of her like a candle.

'You'd better come in,' said the creature in the cage. 'You've had a shock.'

Peri crawled in under the lip of the battered cage roof. She sat on the floor next to the glimmering naked creature. There was a warmth from him. He was so beautiful.

'I suppose you heard all that family stuff too,' she apologised. 'Understandable. Even I pray sometimes.'

They sat in silence. 'I don't know what to do,' she said at last. 'Don't know what to think. What happens now? The Doctor will be

worried. He'll be upset. He'll blame himself. Can I hide down here with you?'

'Hide?' The creature pointed upwards. Peri looked up. Stars and angels gazed down at her. A heavenly host daubed in bright smudgy colours all across the inside of the metal roof, hovering just above their heads.

'Did you do this?' asked Peri. The images were oddly comforting. Better than that, they were distracting.

'My name was Yy,' answered the creature and studied his coloured fingers. 'I no longer exist.'

'There was a sign in the market,' Peri added. *'Only the Dead Sea...* I thought it said *ankles.* But it was *angels.* Wish I had a built- in spellcheck. *Only the dead see angels.'* She looked up at the painted throng above. 'But you're not an angel. You don't have wings.'

'I pulled the roof in. I beat it down with my fists. So no one could see inside.'

'To keep the outside out?'

Yy winced again 'On Aktm in the Sojussa system, the Kings are choosing the yearly sacrifice to the angry sea. Five billion, seventy-three million, nine thousand, one hundred and seven people are praying it is not them.'

'Doesn't really work, does it?' she said. 'Tell me what happened. I don't want to talk about myself:

'Yy *was* an angel in the guardian hosts, a lieutenant in Amethyst Flight, charged with the administration of newly arrived souls. Their allocation and settlement in the afterworld.'?

'A desk job?' suggested Peri.

He shrugged his exquisite shoulders. 'Yy had never set wing outside the delectable realm. An innocent untutored in worldly ways. But

the others laughed at him.'

'Why? Don't suppose they were any wiser?'

'Because once he complained. No one had ever complained before.'

'Must have been a good reason. I never stop complaining. It doesn't mean I'm unhappy.'

'Yy so loved his job that he complained he wanted to do more. And they just laughed. He tried for a post as Selector in the Reincarnation Department, but he was so good at easing the passage of transmigrating souls that he was passed over. No shame or sorrow. He had to be content in his place.'

Peri tried to sympathise. 'They obviously really valued his... *your* work.'

'And then, one fateful day, the Believers of the living universe discovered the location ofHeaven's great gates. From that moment, the universe changed. Belief became truth. Pilgrims came to the new shrine and a great city grew up all around. A city in the image of Heaven, magnificent, but tainted by the living, by their greed and vice.'

Peri nodded. 'That's this place. This city. The Doctor called it the suburbs of Heaven.'

'Indeed.' A note of sourness edged into Yy's voice. 'And a vile and wicked place it is too. Full of sin and temptation for the unwary. It was a catastrophe. Just imagine. The State of Heaven itself and all its Mysteries were threatened. A new realm had to be sought elsewhere.'

'Don't see why.'

'The Ministers of Grace who govern the true realm of Heaven chose to withdraw to another place, where it would remain pure and unassailed. And its Mysteries would be preserved.'

Pride before a fall, she thought. Isn't pride a sin? 'But that's just isolating yourselves. Cutting yourself off from your fan base. And everything left behind turned into a tourist attraction.'

'I was talking about Yy,' insisted Yy.

Peri shrugged. 'Still think it was a big mistake. People want proof of their beliefs.'

'It... was... decided,' he snapped, 'that an annunciation must be made.'

'Okay. That's traditional.'

Yy's words were starting to falter. 'A proclamation would be issued as to the relocation of the realm of Heaven.' He stared up at the painted hosts ofHeaven.

'Go on,' said Peri. 'What happened? What was the reaction?'

He opened and dosed his mouth. His fmgers locked and unlocked. When he spoke his voice was dry and cracked. 'It never came.'

Peri leaned over and took his hand. It was smooth and cool.

'I have never spoken to anyone ofthis,' Yy said. His imploring eyes met hers .They were full of lost love.

'Was it you?' she asked. And his head nodded vigorously. His voice was clogged with the tears ofmillennia.

'Yy was chosen for that greatest honour. Something new to do at last. But taking flight over the city outside for the first time, visible to the world, Yy went down into the marketplace. The wares on sale there fascinated and beguiled the innocent angel. Yy saw so many things that he neither knew, nor understood for their dangers. Forbidden things. Worldly things. Things that are secret in Heaven to a mere lieutenant in the lower hosts. Yy was an ethereal, knowing nothing of greed or desire or...' The angel shuddered. 'Or all those forbidden fruits of the flesh. Yy was just a messenger.'

He stopped to wipe his ethereal nose. ‘But Yy desired just one taste. One sip of knowledge. The darkest knowledge. The flesh.’ His voice coarsened with contempt - “It’ll cost yer,” said the stallsman. “I have nothing to give,” said Yy. And the stallsman thought for a moment. “You got a fine set of feathers there,” said he. “Fine enough to make a coat.”’

‘You didn’t?’ said Peri.

Yy swallowed hard. He shuffled in the straw, dragging himself on his hands, slowly turning his back on her. Between his shoulders were two crimson wounds - not bleeding, but raw as meat on a butcher’s slab. He hunched forward and wept uncontrollably.

Peri slid her arm round his lower back and hugged him for a while. ‘So your annunciation never got made.’

‘And the universe is lost,’ he cried. ‘No one knows that Heaven has gone away.’

She sighed. They can’t blame you. Sounds like the whole of Heaven needs to go on a customer-relations course.’ She hugged him again and passed him a hanky. ‘So was it worth it? Whatever it was you paid for?’

‘It was filthy. I spat it out.’

‘Oh,’ she said, trying either to cover her embarrassment or spare herself his. ‘That’s okay. I don’t need to know...’

‘The flesh I damned all of Creation for a taste of it. Aren’t you shocked?’

‘Well, that’s temptation for you.’

‘No one told me. I didn’t know how much I’d want it or need it. That urge of desiring and craving. The gorgeous, grinding appetite inside. I couldn’t resist. So I did it, without a thought. Sold my beautiful golden wings, gave *everything* away!’

‘But what for?’

He doubled forward in grief. ‘For the bite of a cheeseburger.’

Peri nearly laughed. ‘Is that all?’

‘Everything. Just everything.’ And he went on weeping.

With or without fries? she thought. She waited until the crying subsided, which was a while. ‘I just realised. I suppose I’m a ghost now.’

He snuffled. ‘You will be if you stay around here. Why didn’t you follow the tunnel up towards the light?’ ‘There wasn’t a tunnel,’ she said.

A scowl spread over his face. ‘This was deliberate. *They* sent you here. Those little devils, the putti.’

‘The cherubs?’

‘The living cannot see me, except by decree. That’s why I hid here. So they sent something I couldn’t ignore. A lost soul. One of my charges.’

‘Only the dead see angels,’ repeated Peri.

Yy swung back and forth on his hands. ‘You should be winging up the tunnel. But they sent you to me instead. They needed you to get at me. That’s why they killed you!’

Peri had no words to speak. Had she died just for this? As if in answer to her silence, there was a chuckling noise from outside. The angel gave a gasp of fright and buried his face in his knees. ‘I don’t exist! Make them go away!’

Edging to the lip of the cage’s bent roof, Peri squinted out.

Across the floor, as far as she could see, hundreds of pairs of

sapphire eyes catching the glimmer from her angel. A sea of cherubs. The whole flock had gathered. All staring at her.

Oh, God. What did they want? She was a ghost. What could she do, other than hug her fallen angel and mouth meaningless soothing noises? She pulled back inside the cage.

'Trapped,' moaned Yy. He stared up at the accusing painted angels flocked on his metal roof. Then he rounded on Peri. 'You've no business here. Go away. Leave me alone!'

That did it. Things she'd always wanted to say to the Doctor came tumbling out. 'You shut up! Always criticising and complaining. You're so self-obsessed. Just think about other people for once!'

'I don't exist.'

She pointed outside. *'They* seem to think so.'

'They hurt you. They *killed* you. It's all my fault!'

Little baby faces were gazing in under the lip of the roof. Peri ignored the audience. 'Maybe it is. But you're still Yy. Still an angel. You could still do something!'

'Too late.'

'So why am *I* here?' Out of her coat she produced the golden feather. It gleamed with its own radiance. 'This is yours, isn't it?'

Yy gazed at the feather. 'I stole back just one. And then lost that too. Theft is another sin.'

'Not theft,' said Peri. 'It isn't lost. And you could still finish your job.'

He slowly reached for the feather. But he saw his stained figures stretching out and snatched back his hand. 'I'm tainted. Defiled by longing.'

Peri grabbed his shoulders, ignoring his squeals of pain. ‘I’m praying to you, Yy. Are you listening? Please, please finish your work. Do it. Because I believe in you.’

The angel Yy gave a low sigh and clutched her arm. ‘Endless prayers I hear. Endless. But I never had the chance before to answer one.’

‘Thank you,’ she said quietly. ‘Is there a way out?’

Yy eyed the watching cherubic faces. ‘The world taught me to lie too. There is a way out, but you’ll have to help me. My legs are weak.’

The cherubs clustered close as Peri struggled under the lip, supporting Yy on her shoulder. She had to push at them to force through.

‘That way,’ said Yy pointing between the cages, and they edged a slow path, lit by his radiance, wading between the staring putti. Step by step. A chuckle here. An answer ahead of them. The sudden flutter of wings. Hundreds of cold little eyes. At any moment the whole flock might rise up and shred them.

‘Thought they were meant to be friendly,’ whispered Peri.
‘Mischievous,’ replied Yy. ‘They have a job to do.’

Peri yelped as a cherub pinched viciously at her leg. ‘Other way, other way!’ hissed Yy.

She turned and the shape of her discarded body lay ahead surrounded by putti. She faltered. ‘I don’t want to see. Not again.’ There was a barrage of pinches. ‘No! Just leave it. Make sure it has a decent funeral.’ The putti pinched her again and she lashed out with her free arm. ‘No!’

‘Get in,’ said Yy gently

‘What?’

‘You’ve played your part. I’m out. Now get back in.’

Before she could stop herself, Peri found herself sinking, sliding back into the warmth of her own shape. Her body fitting snugly around her. Good to be back home, very much alive.

She sat up and coughed. She smelt the world again. Its dust in her throat. She felt mucky and used. And the putti still surrounded her.

‘Not finished yet,’ declared the angel Yy. ‘Now I need your physical help.’

She sighed and started gathering the spilled contents of her bag, amazed that she seemed to have no injuries at all. ‘But I can see you.’

‘Dead or alive again, you’ll never lose that second sight.’

She caught him as he fell, took his weight and walked him through the waiting cherubs to the handleless door. This time it slid open easily. Up the stairs they went into the dazzling living light of Heaven’s suburbs.

They paused beside the TARDIS (no sign of the Doctor).

Yy’s hand went to his head. ‘Twenty-three people stuck in a long queue here on Sheol are praying that their new guide will shut up and the tour will end.’

Peri smiled. The Doctor was still busy.

Yy pointed her towards the Elysian Fields. The Gates are that way.’ And he leaned on her as they set off across the brown turf. ‘Have you still got your speech?’ asked Peri. She watched the pink cloud of putti turn sharply in the palace-filled sky above them. ‘Too late for that,’ he answered. ‘That moment’s passed.’

‘But… ‘ she stuttered.

‘But I can still complete my other task? He sounded certain, but his

weight was getting too much for her.

‘What other task?’

‘Close the door.’ He saw her look of bewilderment. ‘Old Heaven is gone. I’m the last one out’

‘As long as you don’t turn the lights out too.’ She hefted his growing weight.

In the distance, she saw two huge stone pillars standing alone on the park, clear of any wall or building. And between the edifice and themselves stretched a long, long winding queue of pilgrims in wheelchairs. A dulcet announcement blared over speakers. Sir John Gielgud *again: ‘Waiting time to the Gates is currently seven hours. Please have your tickets for the holy shrine ready.’*

Peri groaned. ‘Sorry. I don’t think I can carry you much further.’ And she dropped him.

The putti wheeled above.

Yy pointed at a booth hiring out wheelchairs. He produced some coins. ‘Change from the flesh,’ he mumbled embarrassedly.

Peri collected a chair from the nurse in charge. ‘Who is this for?’ asked the woman, oblivious of the angel already sitting comfortably under the woollen rug.

‘No time,’ called Peri and started to run, skirting the sides of the queuing area. Ensconced in his seat, Yy began to laugh as the queuers turned to stare. The chair moved easily. Guards began to shout. And as she ran, Peri heard her own name being called. She could see an arm waving from the middle of the queue, above the curly yellow hair of the Doctor. About four hours from the front, she reckoned.

No time to stop.

Peri and an angel in a wheelchair. On and round towards the front

and the looming Gates. A huge grinning rubber cherub waddled into their path, but they sent it flying to the ground. Several stewards, dressed as hermits, were closing in, but a sudden swoop of cherubs, fluttering and pinching, threw them into total disarray.

Putti were swooping in everywhere, sending the stewards and queuers reeling in panic, clearing the path for Peri.

‘The Gates of Old Heaven,’ shouted Yy. Between the crumbling pillars of the shrine stood two immense doors, their hard surfaces throwing back the pearly light in all colours of the rainbow. One door was closed, the other was ajar and a red rope cordoned offthe path for the queuing tourists to pass through to the other side. The edge of the door was worn smooth by the hands of countless pilgrims.

Yy braced himself. ‘Straight through,’ he called.

Peri gave one final burst of speed, mowing down the cordon, and steering straight through the gap.

The park on the other side was just as full of chaos. No choir of angels to greet them, just putti dive-bombing anyone who came near.

Yy stumbled out of his wheelchair and set his hands to the huge door. He began to push and Peri pushed with him. Slowly the door inched forward. And slowly the coloured stains on Yy’s splayed fingers faded and dissolved until his hands were cleansed and pure, radiant like the rest of his body. But the scars on his back stayed crimson.

With a mighty clang, the door heaved into place. Yy opened a tiny door set in the pearl facia and turned the small black key inside, and the Gates ofOld Heaven were shut.

Peri hugged him hard. ‘Now what?’ she said trying to regain her breath, a little disappointed at the lack of fireworks or seraphic rapture.

‘It’s just a closure,’ said Yy. ‘Somebody had to do it.’

‘Yeah I guess that was important.’ She looked at the chaos around them.

The crowds had withdrawn, but the cherubs were still swooping low. ‘Where will you go now? Back to Heaven?’

‘The *New* Heaven,’ he reminded her. ‘I have to search for it. Just like the rest of you.’

‘There are still good things out here,’ she said. ‘Plenty of good people.’

He half smiled. ‘But I can no longer fly’ He looked up at a little group of putti who were chuckling in the air above him. They suddenly swooped and lifted him gently off the ground. ‘What’s this?’ He started to laugh. ‘Am I forgiven after all? Are we going home?’

The putti joined with his laughter.

‘Wait,’ shouted Peri and they circled back. ‘Yy, tell me one thing’

‘Ask,’ he called down.

‘Have you seen Him?’

‘Him?’

‘Yes. You’re from Heaven. You must have seen Him.’

The angel’s face clouded with incomprehension. ‘Heaven’s a big organisation, Peri. No one actually *sees* Him.’ He said it as if it was obvious.

‘So how do you know He exists?’

Yy was silent for a moment. The putti giggled. Then they fluttered their burden in close.

‘It’s all a matter of belief,’ he asserted. ‘If we knew everything, there’d be no faith.’ And he leaned forward his exquisitely handsome features, so very un-Hollywood. ‘May I?’ he asked.

Sure: she said, and he kissed her on the lips. ‘God in Heaven,’ she whispered.

‘Peri?’ said a million voices above her. For suddenly the sky was filled from end to end with a heavenly host, all leaning forward, all puckered up, to kiss, embrace or smother her with their iridescent beating wings.

‘Stop it!’ shouted Yy. ‘That’s enough! You’ve got work to do!’ And the veil fell again and she was alone beside an empty wheelchair in the empty park. She watched a little light rising up into the firmament beyond the clouds and palaces.

‘Peri?’ The Doctor came puffing round the side of the pillars. He swatted at a couple of tiny pink flies that buzzed round his head like miniature putti. ‘This Heaven certainly isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be. I’m not sure what’s been going on, but I think we should move before that tour catches up with us: He eyed the wheelchair. ‘And what did you bring this thing for? I’m not in my dotage yet!’

So there are things you don’t know, she thought, greatly comforted.

His eyes narrowed. ‘What have you been up to?’

‘Not telling,’ she said, but she reached into her bag and pulled out the little box containing the broken fob watch. ‘I was hoping to get this fixed. Sorry.’

He frowned and swatted at another fly. When he opened the box, the watch inside was complete. Mended and ticking again, as if its own personal time had been wound back a week. He beamed with astonishment. ‘Thank you, Peri. This must have cost an arm and a leg.’

Peri just stared in disbelief. ‘Nearly my life,’ she heard herself say.

‘I picked something up for you too,’ he added. ‘In the market.’ Out of a pocket, he produced a shining coppery disc. ‘It’s a halo’ He fixed it in the air over her head where it hovered, humming a little. ‘Saint Perpugilliam the endlessly patient.’

She began to grin. ‘It’s awful. Wonderfully tacky.’

‘Yes, it most certainly is.’ He nudged her. ‘I thought you’d like it.’

Short Trips: Past Tense

Jonathan Morris sent me his pitch on 20 May 2003, and I immediately fell in love with it. He outlined the plot - a First Doctor adventure featuring Robin Hood - but, as he said, the structure was where it got interesting. The story will be related not as a narrative,' his outline read, 'but rather as a selection of features: Doctor Who *Magazine* archives, episode guides, behind-the-scenes features, interviews, fanzine reviews, sections of the script, the novelisation, and descriptions of telesnap reconstructions.' Jonny's brainwave was to create these sources for TV episodes that had never existed in the first place, allowing him to both celebrate and gently mock 1960s Doctor Who serials. What a wonderful idea - especially for Past Tense, a book about Doctor Who and history. Jonny wrote each section of the story in exactly the right tone, even going as far as including deliberate errors in the early extracts. He also enlisted Andrew Pixley and the Time Team contributors to check his pastiches of their then- current work in DWM.

As with any parody, readers who know the original material will see more parallels and in-jokes - but hopefully the overall gag still works. I especially love the anachronistic use of the term Gallifreyan and the perfectly pitched style of the novelisation extract. The story also plays with the cliches of the time The Thief *of Sherwood* was supposedly produced. Regular cast members in the 1960s sometimes missed episodes because they were on holiday, so Jonny has the Doctor absent for a while. Look-a-like plotlines were used in 1966's The Massacre and 1967/68's The Enemy 0f the *World*, so here Jonny has Ian Chesterton as the spitting image of Robin Hood. He could also have fun by casting a 1964 Doctor Who story, roping in real-life actors such as Frank Thornton and Milton Johns. Check out the cast list at the beginning of the story and you'll see Anneke Wills, who in reality played Doctor Who regular Polly, as Maid Marion. This was a little in-joke added during the editing stages. One of the other stories in Past Tense saw Polly leap through time, interacting with adventures from elsewhere in the book. When its writer, Joseph Lidster, landed her in 12th century Sherwood Forest, he decided that Polly would be a doppelganger of

Maid Marion... So it made sense to add to this mind-bending postmodernity by listing Anneke Wills as playing Marion in Jonny's story!

Not every story in an anthology can be unconventional but I was proud to have The Thief of Sherwood in my first collection. I think it's a shining example of what the Short *Trips* range has excelled at: taking risks, playing with expectations, experimenting with what a short story can do, and having fun. But all this talk of pastiche and in-jokes shouldn't obscure how well written the story is. Check out the gags and clever sleights of hand. But also notice how skillfully the story of the Doctor and his friends meeting Robin Hood is revealed to you.

Ian Farrington

The Thief of Sherwood
Jonathan Morris

The Thief of Sherwood
Jonathan Morris

At one time, I suggested giving the Doctor an adventure where he met Robin Hood!'

- William Hartnell

Radio Times, x9 September 1964

DR. WHO
and the Outlaws
DR. WHO

We all know that it is impossible to win battles by history alone. Impossible for us to understand the Doctor by looking at his past. Impossible for us to see into the realms of future space. Impossible for us to see into the realms of future time. But we know that it is impossible to win battles by history alone. Impossible for us to understand the Doctor by looking at his past. Impossible for us to see into the realms of future space, or

Incidental music composed and conducted by
HARPER C. BASSETT
Story editor, David Whitaker
Designer, Barry Newbery
Associate producer, Mervyn Pinfield
Producer, VERITY LAMBERT
Directed by PATRICK WHITFIELD
Is the castle as deserted as it appears? Or is it
a trap for the unwary traveller?

Radio Times Doctor Who 10th Anniversary Special, 5973

The Bandits

The TARDIS lands in the dungeons of Nottingham castle. Ian and Susan are captured and brought before the Sheriff. The others are captured by bandits and taken to Sherwood Forest where they discover that Robin Hood is Ian's double.

The Merry Men elect to rescue Ian and Susan but the attempt fails and Robin is killed. The Doctor saves Susan from execution by posing as a monk. Ian gives away all of Robin's loot.

'Doctor Who-Story Nine', Doctor Who Weekly issue 26, 1980

THE THIEVE OF SHERWOOD

This six-part adventure was first shown on BBC television on September 19th, 1964.

The TARDIS has recently journeyed through the fourth and fifth dimensions. From their positions by the controls the Doctor, Susan, Ian and Barbara watch the scanner. They have landed in sheer darkness!

They emerge into a dungeon cell. A skeleton is chained to the wall! 'That was a human being. We are on Earth!' proclaims the Doctor. They decide to split up to explore. The Doctor and Barbara go

upstairs and discover they are in a deserted medieval castle.

Ian and Susan, meanwhile, meet a pretty young girl called Marion being held prisoner. Ian attempts to force the door to her cell, but the lock is too strong. He heads back to the TARDIS for cutting tools, but discovers that the door to that cell is now also locked. They are not alone...

The Doctor and Barbara reach a nearby village. The houses are all boarded up and the occupants live in fear for their lives.

Back in the dungeons, the man-at-arms who watched Ian and Susan meets with the Sheriff of Nottingham. 'Your plan has succeeded, my Lord!' he says.

'The bandits have entered the castle!'

Ian and Susan are shocked when a portcullis drops, trapping them. Suddenly soldiers emerge from every door and passageway. It is a trap!

The Doctor and Barbara attempt to return to the castle... but are caught by a gang of bandits who take them to their hideout in Sherwood forest. 'Unhand me,' cries the Doctor. 'This is no way to treat a Gallifreyan!'

The bandits identify themselves as Little John and Will Scarlet. Barbara guesses they are being taken to meet Robin Hood! The Doctor is more sceptical. 'Robin Hood is a myth. He is no more real than Sherlock Holmes!'

But the Doctor is proved wrong when they arrive at the outlaw's lair. Their leader, Robin Hood, steps out of the shadows. And he looks exactly like Ian!

'Doctor Who Episode Guide',
Doctor Who Monthly issue 51, 1981

(10th October 1964)

Serial 4, 6 episodes)

The Deserted Castle
(19th September 1964)

The Merry Men
(26th September 1964)

The Thief Of Sherwood
(3rd October 1964)

The Ambush
(10th October 1964)

The Gallows
(17th October 1964)

The Rescue
(24th October 1964)

The prints comprise parts 1, 2 and 4 of this classic adventure where the Doctor encounters Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Part 6 is already held by the archive, but parts 3 and 5 remain sadly missing, but BBC archive selector Sue Malden remains hopeful ofmore Doctor Who episode finds in the future.

Doctor Who - A Celebration, 1983 The Thief of Sherwood

Billed in the BBC press handout as a 'thrilling adventure with Robin Hood', this story followed in the tradition of the serials *Ivanhoe* and *William Tell.* However, it was also a sophisticated and witty exploration of how legends might arise.

Landing in the dungeons of Nottingham castle (luring the time of the Crusades, Ian and Susan are captured by the Sheriff. The Doctor and Barbara meet the less-than-philanthropic Robin Hood, who turns out to be the exact double ofIan. The Doctor plans to negotiate his companion's release by offering the Sheriff the secret of alchemy. When Robin is killed, Ian substitutes for him and leads the Merry Men in an attempt to rescue Susan before she is executed. The Doctor intervenes at the last moment, posing as the priest giving the last rites, and Ian returns the bandits' plunder to the villagers, thereby creating the myth of Robin Hood.

Radio Times Doctor Who
10 Anniversary Special, 1983

The Thief of Sherwood was an intelligently scripted piece of historical adventure, with Ian playing a dual role, himself and Robin Hood, who was Ian's double. Robin Hood was depicted as a villain, and when he is killed, Ian replaces him and seals his reputation.

Doctor Who - The Thief of Sherwood,
Target Novelisation, Godfrey Porter, 1986

First Extract from the Letters of Barbara Wright

Should I ever return to your front room, Auntie Margaret, what a

story I would have to tell! Ever since I was shanghaied into time and space by the Doctor, my life has been a succession of unsavoury disasters. Poisoned by radiation, hailed as a goddess, possessed by an alien brain and let down by a Frenchman, nothing could have prepared me for my current ordeal.

Kidnapped by a band of uncouth, unwashed and unshaven bandits, I found myself thrust into their dismal forest lair, a collection of makeshift tents camouflaged by foliage. My wrists were chafed by bondage and my ankles ached from walking the miles from Nottingham to Sherwood. I collapsed at the feet of an exceptionally malodorous figure and found myself at the unfriendly, not to mention business, end of a crossbow. But although I was hungry, tired and soaked to the skin, my spirits remained undampened as I thought ofhappier times and places, and in particular of your toasted buttered muffins.

You may recall me mentioning one of my colleagues, Mr Ian Chesterton. You recommended him to me during one muffin encounter as a ‘very eligible young man’. Well, as I looked up I discovered that the figure at the friendly end of the crossbow was the exact double of that very eligible young man. Admittedly his hair was bedraggled and his chin was bearded, and his cheeks were smeared in mud, but otherwise it could have been the Ian with whom you once enjoyed several steaming mugs of Ovaltine.

In my confusion, I asked him in what boys’ play-acting game he was indulging. He responded in a thick brogue that I should not speak unless ordered to. I quickly realised that this was not my Ian, but perhaps one of his less salubrious ancestors.

Despite our predicament, my companion, the Doctor, had lost none of his gumption. He travelled the universe as though inspecting a rather dissatisfactory country garden. Upon learning that the name of our lime-garbed companion was Robin Hood, he tutted like a parakeet.

‘ My dear sir,’ ejaculated the Doctor. ‘Whomsoever you might be, you are not Robin Hood. Robin Hood is a character originating, I believe, from the ballads of the late middle ages!’

Robin responded to the Doctor's outburst pointedly with his crossbow. 'I am Robin Hood,' he snarled. 'The most feared, most deadly outlaw of them all! I pillage, I murder, I show no mercy. Not to the King's men, nor his citizens, nor quacking old beggars!'

'Who are you calling *old??'* snapped the Doctor 'I would have you know I am in my prime.' His fingered his lapels like a barrister in an Ealing comedy 'So you are Robin Hood are you? Hmm. So do you steal from the rich and give to the poor?' There was an incredulous silence. And then a roar of laughter rocked the glade.

'Give to the poor, lads?' he shouted. 'Why should we do that? We steal from the poor too!'

Archive: The Thief of Sherwood',
Doctor Who Magazine issue 103, 1985

EPISODE THREE

Ian's life is spared when the castle receives a new visitor - the Doctor, posing as an apothecary to King John. The Doctor tells him that he is on his way to tell the King ofa means to turn base substances into gold. He will grant the Sheriff the secret in return for Ian's safe release. The Sheriff greedily agrees.

The Merry Men then recapture Barbara and the peddler. He is forced to tell them about the secret passageway into the castle. Robin decides he will go with little John to rescue Marion. But in the tunnel they are ambushed by guards. Robin is left for dead.

Little John is brought before the Sheriff and forced to reveal the location of the bandits' hideout. He is locked up with Ian, who he cannot believe is not his friend Robin.

In the meantime, the Sheriff sends his men to Sherwood to kill the Merry Men. He then visits the Doctor in the castle workshop. The Doctor is about to demonstrate how he will turn charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur into gold. As the

Sheriff watches, the Doctor sets light to the mixture. The resultant explosion blows the workshop doors off their hinges and knocks the Doctor and the Sheriff unconscious. The workshop is filled with flames.

'Interview: Godfrey Porter',
Doctor Who Magazine issue 172, 1991

After demob, I returned to Oxford to finish my history degree. I studied mediaeval literature, which would later stand me in good stead on *Doctor Who:* Godfrey entered television scriptwriting by an unusual route. 'My landlord was working as a writer on a series called *William Tell,* and in lieu of rent I would occasionally fill in bits of script for him. When he moved on from the show, he recommended me to the producer. So after that I did some scripts for ATV, an adventure series called *Longboat* which was about the Vikings.

'That was huge fun, and I edited some shows for ATV, and then along came *Doctor Who.*

'I had to do it. My kids wouldn't believe I was a writer unless I did a *Doctor Who.* We'd all been watching it since the one with the Daleks. I knew David [Whitaker] through the Screenwriters' Guild, and suggested a Robin Hood story.

'I'd watched William Hartnell, who I thought had been very good in *Brighton Rock* I liked him. He was very professional, but he could be short- tempered with less experienced actors. But he was always charming to me. I didn't realise he was ill, I thought that was the acting.

'The idea was to do a serial set in the past, but to make it a mixture of fact and fiction. To explore how legends might be shaped on the basis of second- hand accounts. For a children's show, it was quite sophisticated.

After Doctor Who I worked at Rediffusion, writing a series called *The Long Arm* which was a precursor ofZ *Cars.* I then did some editing work on *Compact* and a couple of episodes of *The Challengers*

with Dennis Spooner.'

Godfrey did submit one more idea to the Doctor Who production team, during the 1970s. 'There was one I wrote called *Doctor Who and the Sprites.* It would have been for Tom Baker, but the script editor at the time wasn't keen, so I never finished it.'

The Discontinuity Guide, Virgin Publishing, 1995

DIALOGUE TRIUMPHS

Sheriff of Nottingham - 'You claim to practice alchemy?'

Doctor - 'Practice? Never, my dear sir - I am a professional!' Barbara - 'Historians never let facts get in the way of a good story.'

FLUFFS

William Hartnell - 'I will turn these base substances into pure coal!'

TRIVIA

The role ofMarion was taken by Anneke Wills, who in 1966 would be cast as the Doctor's companion, Polly.

William Harnell was absent from the recording of episodes four and five due to illness, necessitating a last-minute script re-write.

Each episode was structured so that William Russell's costume and make-up changes could take place during recording breaks.

GOOFS

The TARDIS landing sound can be heard after it has materialized.

When Robin wakes up after being knocked unconscious, he is in a different tunnel. After the gaoler has locked Susan in with Maid Marion, the cell door swings open. Robin's accent and moustache vary from episode to episode.

Much of the story is historically and geographically inaccurate.

FASHION VICTIM

Robin's costume is replete with a leather jerkin and peacock-feathered cap.

Doctor Who: The Television Companion,
BBC Books, 1998

ANALYSIS

Perhaps aware that a Robin Hood action adventure serial may be beyond the constraints of *Doctor Who* 's budget, Godfrey Porter decorated his scripts with occasional vignettes of comical humour - perhaps most conspicuously in the whimsical digression of the Doctor bluffing as an incompetent and hapless alchemist. He also avoided concentrating on the physical action sequences, instead making the story a farce of mistaken identity and circumlocution and an exploration into how modern myths and romances may arise.

' What makes this story is Robin's characterisation, documented Gary Russell in the second issue of Shada dated January 1981 'William Russell gives one of his finer performances in the dual role ofRobin and Ian, making Robin an unsympathetic and callous treat. The only drawback is the "trouble-up-at-t mill" accent he adopts.'

The production, whilst not perhaps revisiting the glories of the preceding historicals, was quite good. The finished product is polished if lacking in scale, though Barry Newbery's detailed and richly textured sets are deserving ofbeing singled out for special attention.

All things considered, whilst not an undisputed classic, The Thief of Sherwood is something of a curate's egg.

'The Time Team', Doctor Who Magazine issue 285, 1999

EPISODES (P46 TO DS3)

The Team have assembled at Peter's for another exciting episode of *Robin Hood*. Mary, Ian and Peter are sitting on the bed, Clayton and Jacqui Richard on chairs, and Harry is lying on the floor.

'I'm very excited to see how this episode ends,' says Mary. 'I've been sitting on the edge of my seat for the last two weeks.'

'Me too,' says Ian. 'I'm very interested to see what happens with Robin and Marian.'

'I'm not interested in Marian,' says Harry. 'I'm interested in Clayton.'

'Clayton is dead, Harry,' says Peter. 'He died in episode 3.'

'Yes, but he's coming back, isn't he?' says Harry. 'He's got to be.'

'I'm not so sure,' says Peter. 'The last we saw of him he was caught in a falling portcullis and was killed instantly

Archive: *The Thief Of Sherwood',*
***Doctor Who Magazine* issue 332, 2003**

INTRODUCTION

The Doctor Who Cathedral was recorded on Friday 25 September at Riverside Studio 1; a rare enough thing to see Peter Davison and Colin Baker in the same room, let alone the same episode. With a cliffhanger, but without Mistress Joanna Page.

Reprising their roles from *The Caves of Androzani* and *The Two Doctors* over 18 years ago, Davison and Baker joined forces to battle the Sheriff of Nottingham in a new adventure written by Mark Gatiss.

Gatiss's script, *The Thief Of Sherwood*, was a reworking of his unproduced *Robin Hood* script for the BBC in the early 1990s. Gatiss had been commissioned to write a story for the Sylvester McCoy era, but the project was abandoned when the BBC decided not to produce any new episodes of the show in 1991.

Gatiss's script was then reworked by Steven Moffat for the 1993 Comic Relief special *The Curse of Fatal Death*, in which Rowan Atkinson played the Sheriff of Nottingham. Moffat's version was also unproduced.

Gatiss's original script was set in the 1950s, but was updated to the present day for the 2003 version. The Sheriff's castle was replaced by a modern office block, and the Sheriff's men were given modern weapons.

The production was directed by Ed Bye, who had previously worked on *Doctor Who* as a production assistant on the 1996 TV movie. Bye's direction was praised for its energy and its use of the studio space.

Davison's Doctor was described as "more assertive than he was in the 1980s", while Baker's Doctor was "more eccentric than he was in the 1980s". Both actors were reported to have enjoyed working together again.

The episode was broadcast on BBC One on Saturday 25 October 2003 at 6.00pm, and was watched by 5.2 million viewers. It received generally positive reviews, with praise for the performances of Davison and Baker, and for the production values.

PRODUCTION

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Enterprises as a 16mm film recording. A third episode survives in a private collection.

The Thief Of Shoreditch was sold to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in the early 1970s. By 1974, BBC Enterprises had photographs of Robin Sachs and the Doctors were junked. Only a few episodes survived, including a letter from Junior Points Of View.

In the BBC Film Library remained a 16mm print of *Eyes Of The Gallows;* in 1982, it provoked a lively discussion in the Sheriffs' Chamber at the Mansion House, during which the Lord Mayor of London and Aldermen viewed the film, along with some BBC executives, after lunch. The BBC's Head of Enterprises, Jonathan Powell, said he was 'delighted' that the film had been returned to the Corporation.

In 2004, *The Thief of Shoreditch* was cleaned up by the BBC's Film Restoration Unit and released on DVD, with *Ankh: The Last Of The Mohicans* (as well as the surviving episodes of *Doctor Who*).

Contemporary reviews were mixed. Mary Whitehouse wrote to the BBC's Director-General, Hugh Greene, complaining that the serial was 'unsuitable for children'. Greene replied that he had not seen the serial but would look into the matter. Whitehouse's complaint was not upheld.

The serial was broadcast in Australia in 1966 and 1967, with six 405-line telerecordings surviving. The BBC Film Library ret

Short Trips: Life Science

One of the joys of editing Short Trips is the ability to introduce writers who are new to professional publication. In A Universe *of* Terrors I was particularly pleased to welcome Andy Campbell, who contributed a dark and clever Fifth Doctor story - Long Term - in which a boys' school was plagued by a horrific entity. The style of Long Term was very much influenced by MR lames' ghost stories, and I was pleased when Andy suggested a story for Life Science that would use a Victorian setting. The Age of Ambition is a cracking little tale that evokes the Second Doctor's era perfectly, while also adding in some zombie action that doubtless wouldn't have made it onto the screen in the Sixties. Importantly, it also gives a more intelligent and cultured voice to Victoria Waterfield than we're used to: something that raised my eyebrows at first, but really serves the story and the character well.

John Binns

The Age of Ambition
Andy Campbell

I

I shall not go back to 1866 again.

There is so much I wish to relate, but already I pause; the nib of my quill pen hovers irresolutely over the page. I read my first sentence over and over again, as the ink gradually ceases to glisten and the words dry to permanence. How odd those words appear, written in my own hand! For I was ever the most conservative and sentimental of girls; I always disliked change. Even Miss Mary, my favourite doll in childhood, I was hesitant to put aside as I grew too old for such playthings; Miss Mary represented a stability and predictability of life that I was reluctant to relinquish. In the end I surrendered her in response to my father's gentle admonition: 'You're a grown-up lady now, Victoria.' As I once gave up my doll, so now I give up my whole life, my home, and the era of my birth: 'the Victorian era', as posterity will term it. I have seen and heard things that make it impossible for me ever to return: sights and sounds that have changed me to the heart. I have experienced a crisis of faith in the wisdom of my elders that has left me with no choice but to turn my back on my beginnings; perhaps that is the meaning of adulthood. I shall not go back again.

The business that has finally brought me to this drastic decision had its beginning, as far as I am concerned, with a remarkable discussion between my dear father, Professor Edward Waterfield, and Sir Charles Westbrooke - the renowned researcher into human physiology and author of that important work, *Principles of Human Anatomy,* published in four volumes in 1861.

On the evening of the third day of September in the year of grace 1864, Papa and I were invited for dinner at Westbrooke's fine Georgian home in Canterbury. Since Mama's untimely death the previous autumn, Papa's many friends from the English scientific community had rallied impressively to our support. Though

relations between my father and Westbrooke perhaps stood closer to acquaintanceship than to true friendship, I believe we both numbered him among those who had helped to mitigate our bereavement with his lively company and wide. ranging conversation; and to Westbrooke's sympathy for our loss had been added empathy, for his own wife Claire had recently died in a most tragic manner, murdered by ruffians who had broken into his house with larcenous intent.

On this particular evening we were seated together in Westbrooke's vast high-ceilinged drawing room, the opulence of which I found rather oppressive. The walls were papered blood red, and vast dark oil paintings depicting military scenes were mounted upon them. The thick carpet was pale brown, bearing an infinitely complex swirling pattern of leaf-like structures: the art of design Aunt Margaret always accuses of causing her a headache. The armchairs were enormous, and covered in dark leather. Above the fireplace hung a large mirror with an elaborate gilt frame. I recalled that Westbrooke, who had been something of a big-game hunter in his youth, had once indicated that he would have preferred a stag's head mounted above his fireplace; but Claire had apparently expressed distaste at the idea of having 'horrible dead things in the house and Westbrooke had deferred to her in the matter.

Dinner was over, and Westbrooke was embarked on a singular exposition that was evidently directed toward my father only. Papa listened earnestly, his pince-nez perched in a scholarly fashion near the end of his nose. He knew that he could always learn something from Westbrooke. Meanwhile I sat quietly in a corner of the drawing room, making slow but steady progress in my needlework, listening to Westbrooke and wondering (as I often did in such circumstances) whether the two men realised how closely I was attending to what was being said.

'Very early one morning,' Westbrooke said, 'about a week after my beloved Claire's death, I emerged from a remarkably vivid dream, in which I had beheld my wife so clearly that I woke with tears upon my face. Curiously, in my dream, Claire appeared not as herself but as Desdemona, the heroine of Shakespeare's Othello. As I stirred to full wakefulness, the significance of the dream gradually

became apparent to me. As a young girl in college, Claire had once told me, she had played the role ofDesdemona in an amateur dramatic production. She had described with a kind of bashful pride the enormous effort she had expended in memorising her lines, an effort so single-minded and ultimately efficacious that even years later she could recall without fault or hesitation every word the Bard had given his heroine to utter.

'As I lay there alone in our nuptial bed, I began to ask myself with nothing less than a thrill of panic: what had become of her awareness of those lines when she died? Where had they gone? A hundred hours of study and practice to absorb them, and in an instant they had vanished into the ether. In that moment it was borne upon me what a thorough nonsense is death, what a stupid futile undoing of the long arduous process of filling one's mind and forming one's character. A scholar arrives at his deathbed after a lifetime of study: his erudition is irretrievably lost in a moment. A soldier forges his spirit in a score of campaigns on the battlefield: where goes his bravery in the final moment as the bullet enters his brain? And what becomes of the poet's acquired sensitivity? Nature, when Nature herself sees fit to end him?' 'This is a mystery,' Papa said meditatively; then looked embarrassed, no doubt sensing that his remark would seem a platitude.

'My studies of anatomy have not helped,' Westbrooke continued 'After twenty-five years of research, I think I can say that I understand human biology as well as any man alive. Yet when death is understood in a physiological sense, it appears not less but more ridiculous. The heart stops, the blood cools, the mind fades into oblivion - and then the undignified and foul process of necrosis, the degeneration of flesh and organs, all the cells unravelling at once, and the result too disgusting to look upon.'

I paused in my sewing. My needle, almost motionless, but trembling very slightly between my fingers, glinted in the candlelight. By now I felt sure that both my father and Westbrooke were so engrossed in what the latter was saying that they had temporarily lost consciousness of my presence; certainly, had they not, they would never have discussed such gruesome matters in the presence of a young woman

‘You see,’ Westbrooke explained, ‘I was taught from childhood that death is the most natural of phenomena, only to be expected, and hence not to be feared. On the morning of my dream I perceived that it is, on the contrary, the least natural of all possible events. It followed to my mind that death should be avoidable, treatable, like any other pointless piece of human suffering, if only we are willing to put aside our preconceptions and think.’

I looked up and saw that my father’s face expressed disquiet at this speculative turn in Westbrooke’s argument; for Westbrooke, as well as a thorough and disciplined scholar, was known as something of an iconoclast, a radical thinker and perhaps, in some ill-defined way, a dangerous one. ‘What are you driving at, Charles?’ he asked.

Westbrooke did not answer the question directly. Instead he asked: ‘I assume you have read Mr Darwin’s *Origin ofSpecies by Means of Natural Selection?’*

‘Of course,’ Papa replied. ‘What serious scientist has not read it, and who has not entered into the debate it has inspired?’

‘Quite so. One has to admire Mr Darwin’s moral courage. But the implications of his theory have not yet been fully worked out. He argues that all living things, including ourselves, are in continuous competition for limited resources, does he not? And in a fundamentally hostile world, those organisms that possess characteristics conferring better chances of survival will live longer, and have more offspring, which in turn inherit those characteristics. It follows that natural selection, as Mr Darwin terms it, operates only on the young - those who are still able or likely to have children. By the time we arrive at old age, some of us will have reproduced and others will not, but evolution has nothing further to say about what happens to our bodies, and will not mitigate the ravages of old age. So we decline and die - but where is the natural law that decrees that we must?’

‘’Tis common, all that lives must die,’ said my father cryptically beg your pardon?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said self-consciously. ‘Queen Gertrude to Hamlet. You reminded me earlier of Shakespeare:

‘And you in turn remind me of my dear Claire; said Westbrooke with a sad smile: Such a loss as ours is hard to support, is it not, Edward? I know that your Edith is never far from your thoughts.’

‘No, indeed; agreed Papa.

‘Such a great loss; Westbrooke said. ‘Pneumonia, was it not? A cruel illness. And at such a tender age - thirty-six?’ Thirty-seven?’

I had lost interest in my needlework; I let the piece of fabric sink down onto my lap. In my mind I was seeing Mama’s face, just as I always pictured it: patient and serene, the face of an angel, with just a few little telling signs of tiredness around the eyes.

‘Forgive my touching upon it, Edward,’ said Westbrooke, ‘but I know you appreciate frank speech. In addition to your profound grief at Edith’s death, were you not touched by its - futility? Increasingly, as I think of Claire, the profound pointlessness of losing her is the thing that affects me most. Dying should be reversible:

It is not,’ Papa replied with resignation, and he settled back in his armchair. ‘Why not?’Westbrooke asked.

My father’s eyes, which for some while had been focusing absently on the contents of his brandy glass, now looked up sharply to meet Westbrooke’s stare.’ Resurrection of the dead would be an outrage against common sense; my father said.

‘What common sense?’

‘Charles, I have to ask - is all this seriously meant?’

Westbrooke got to his feet and strolled across to the mirror above his fireplace, where he stood gazing meditatively at his own reflection for a few moments before turning back to address my father.

‘I think I might be able to do it, Edward; he said.

‘Impossible!’ was my father’s response.

Westbrooke smiled, and in the flickering candlelight his smile appeared to me slightly dangerous. ‘You are quite right, Edward; he replied without resentment. It is impossible. But here we encounter an important stumbling block to many an intelligent person’s thinking. Merely knowing that something is impossible should never deter one from doing it. You know as well as I do, Edward, that until 1609 it was impossible to observe the surface of another planet; until 1776 it was impossible to pilot a vehicle beneath the sea; until 1847 it was impossible to perform surgery without inflicting the most terrible pain; and of course there are endless further examples. The most casual student of history can confirm that impossibility is merely a matter of dates. How our descendants will marvel at our nineteenth-century narrow-mindedness, with our defeatist assumption that death is irreversible! Just as we look back upon our ancestors of the Middle Ages, and view them with a mixture of pity and contempt for their belief, now so obviously mistaken, that the world is flat’

‘I know that death is irreversible,’ Papa insisted.

Here Westbrooke became more animated. ‘Yes of course you do, my friend. You know it in your heart, in your mind, in the very depths of your being. And in just the same way, and with equal conviction, our forefathers of five hundred years ago knew that the world was a flat disc, with the heavens rotating around it. They knew it because they had been told it from birth, and had been exposed to no other idea’

‘Only the Lord can give life,’ said Papa. ‘And certainly none other than the Lord could restore it’

‘Some are already arguing that Mr Darwin’s work renders the Lord unnecessary,’ countered Westbrooke. I saw that my father looked unhappy at this, but Westbrooke continued undaunted. ‘And even if God were all that He is assumed to be, why would He give us such

extensive creative faculties if we were not intended to exploit them fully? The human brain is Nature's crowning marvel, Edward. Whether it has evolved or was divinely conceived is a matter for debate, but probably irrelevant. In either case, do you suppose for one moment that the brain's functions do not extend beyond designing a few simple mechanical contraptions or perfecting a handful of vaccines? No, the human intellect is equal to grander challenges. I believe this century will change things in undreamed of ways. Death's days are numbered, my friend'

'Very well, Charles,' said my father cautiously. 'In practical terms - how is it to be done?'

'I have begun to conduct simple experiments into this matter,' said Westbrooke, 'and I have already obtained some interesting results. For example, one of my lines of inquiry concerned the grafting of a modified Connaughton steam-pump into the left ventricle of the heart in certain mammals that had been deliberately euthanised. Believe me, I confirmed beyond any possibility of doubt that the animals had truly died; but later, with the circulatory system thus artificially fortified, they were not only restored to activity, but in addition proved - shall we say -'

Here Westbrooke faltered uncharacteristically; perhaps he had remembered my presence and was concerned not to upset me, after all. 'Proved what?' asked Papa.

The animals proved remarkably difficult to kill for a second time.'

'I must say I disapprove of such work,' Papa said reproachfully. 'How exactly did you attempt to kill these unfortunate creatures - the second time?'

My needlework was quite forgotten; I felt hypnotised as I watched Westbrooke's eyes gleaming in the candlelight. 'I tried almost everything I could think of, Edward,' he said. 'It was not to be accomplished. In fact, I am beginning to believe that death itself may be merely a consequence of the failure of inherently inefficient physiological processes. An imperfectly designed machine will inevitably break down sooner or later. A perfectly designed

machine should run indefinitely, because there will never be any specific reason for it to stop.'

Westbrooke paused to pour more brandy for my father and for himself from his cut-glass decanter.

'Consider human blood, for example,' he said. 'I have been conducting research into the cardiovascular system for a good many years, and as you know, I contributed substantially to Dr Halsey's famous volumes on haematology. By far the most remarkable feature of blood is its degree of impurity - even the blood of a newborn child. If we in our chemical laboratories were set the task of developing blood for the first time, in order to perform the functions that we now know it has, we would certainly mix the constituent chemicals in very different proportions from those actually observed.'

Papa was incredulous. 'Blood could be - better?' he asked.

'Oh yes,' replied Westbrooke. 'Much better. I have established it beyond doubt. And that is just the beginning.' Papa rose to his feet. 'I wish to hear no more, Charles,' he said. The line of thought you are propounding is too gruesome to pursue.'

Westbrooke smiled indulgently. 'My dear Edward! In a moment you will surely mention Frankenstein. We have all been engrossed by that particular romance, have we not? And delighted in the fecundity of

Mrs Shelley's imagination? But why should there be anything inherently gruesome about returning from death to life? On the contrary, what could be more beautiful or dignified than overcoming the ultimate enemy and returning in triumph to one's loved ones? In death and decay lies all that is squalid and ugly. We should not allow our sensibilities, much less our fear, to cause us to shrink from the possibility of overcoming these things'

My father, who had begun pacing the floor, returned to his seat. For almost a minute he gazed into Westbrooke's eyes, as if searching there for a flicker of self-doubt. For Papa knew what I did not then

fully appreciate, that Westbrooke was a genius; and he was no doubt reasoning that ifthe man was wholly convinced ofwhat he was saying, we should consider accepting it also.

'Is it possible, Charles?' my father whispered at last.

'You'll see, my friend,' said Westbrooke. 'It will be beautiful.' And in that moment the candle closest to Westbrooke, the one illuminating his face, abruptly went out.

II

The matter rested there. In fact, we saw very little of Westbrooke after that evening; he began to retreat into seclusion, showing diminishing interest in any kind of social intercourse, and it was noticed that he ceased to write for the various scientific journals to which he had formerly been a prolific contributor. He also apparently decided that he could do without servants; and there was, I recall, something of a minor scandal in Canterbury due to the local people's perception that he had dismissed his staff without good reason.

Within two years my own life had changed irreversibly: my beloved father had died in a manner that I could not have imagined in 1864; but I acquired two remarkable friends, who each day challenge the limits of what I consider possible. My recent experiences seem to me like remembered dreams, yet each of them truly happened. The Doctor, Jamie McCrimmon and I stood together in that nightmare city of thinking machines; there Papa sacrificed his life confronting demons of which mankind has not yet dreamt. Soon afterward, in the heart of a bleak and ashen desert, we penetrated a tomb that was but a trap for the intelligent; this time the fiends were of a different form, but no less fearful for their closer kinship with ourselves.

The Doctor has told me that we three occupy a special place in the scheme of Creation, and I believe him. Cautiously, like a liberated slave who stretches unshackled limbs for the first time, I grow accustomed to the idea that the TARDIS can travel anywhere without restriction. Yet I must confess (as the flying machine is

incorrigibly unreliable, by its pilot's own confession) that I had considered it more likely that I should set foot on the sun than that I should simply return home. The Doctor, however, in the casual manner in which he habitually dispenses great truths, assures me that all possible events will occur sooner or later, if one is willing to wait long enough.

So it was that on the evening of the fifth ofJune in the year 1866 (I was to discover the precise date later), we set down in the gardens of Westbrooke's house. As on our previous journeys, I did not feel as if we were the ones arriving; on the contrary, as we stood together in the ship's pale-coloured control room I felt as if a fresh environment were materialising around us, while we stayed still. The Doctor activated the screen by which we would be able to observe our new surroundings. I beheld the extensive gardens surrounding Westbrooke's home, the flowers and trees shining in monochrome beneath a full moon, and I realised I was back in the England I knew.

'It's home; I said disbelievingly. 'I'm home.'

On the screen, the house itself could be partially glimpsed through the interlacing foliage of vast dark elms that moved slightly in a steady breeze. It was just as I recalled it, an enduring testimony to Westbrooke's considerable wealth: an enormous three-storied mansion in red brick, with courses and cornices of white stone, and trimmings of white-painted woodwork. Part of the top floor appeared curiously illumined, and within moments I sensed that something was wrong.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor, as if in confirmation of my fears. He was studying the screen, a diminutive black-clad figure, his hands wringing together nervously.

Jamie moved to the Doctor's side. 'What's that light in the upstairs, Doctor?'

'I believe there's a fire,' said the Doctor. 'Oh dear, dear me, how very careless.'

‘I know this place,’ I told them. ‘It belongs to a friend of my father. A distinguished scientist - Sir Charles Westbrooke.’

The Doctor turned to me. ‘Really, Victoria? How very interesting. Well then -’ with a vigorous clap of his hands - ‘we’d better hurry and see what the problem is, hadn’t we?’ And he operated the lever that opened the door of the ship.

‘We must help him, Doctor,’ I said. ‘He’s a good man - a great man But he suffered terribly when his wife died, and I think that with no one to look after him, he may not be - he may not be very well:

‘Here we go again; said Jamie ruefully. ‘The TARDIS never arrives anywhere there isn’t a problem, does it Doctor?’ While Jamie said this he was watching me, not the Doctor. It was a rhetorical question, intended by the Highlander as part of my education.

‘Well, that’s synchronicity, you see, Jamie; explained the Doctor perfunctorily, rubbing his hands together and advancing toward the TARDIS doors as they swung open with a low hum.

‘Oh aye, synchro... aye,’ Jamie replied. We moved out of the TARDIS and onto a wide lawn, its grass bleached to a silvery grey by the bright moonlight. The flying machine had materialised near an ornate sundial. Despite the lateness of the hour, the breeze that ruffled our clothes was warm. It was now beyond doubt that the glowing light filling several of the building’s upper windows was the result of a blaze inside. The Doctor strode off purposefully toward the house, Jamie and me hurrying to keep up with him.

On the way I briefly detailed Westbrooke’s distinguished career in medicine, and hinted at the strange dark changes that had come over his thinking after the tragic loss of his wife. The Doctor shook his head sadly at my brief account of Claire’s murder. Jamie, too, was grim- faced; he was a man of war, but the notion of murdering a woman disgusted him

‘I haven’t seen Westbrooke since 1864,’ I concluded as we reached the house. ‘But I remember that he dismissed all his servants. No one knew why.’

An imposing flight of steps, flanked by stone columns, led up to the main entrance of the house. The door was made of solid oak, and securely locked. I was on the point of suggesting the servant's entrance, but in a moment the Doctor had produced a twisted stick of metal from one of his many pockets and expertly picked the lock. He pushed the heavy door open, and as it swung back we moved cautiously into the vast entrance hall.

The hallway was richly carpeted and flanked by ornamental suits of armour. Each of the suits grasped some outsized and hideous weapon, which Jamie noted with interest. A remarkable collection of firearms was displayed on the walls, in many mounted glass cases. Both sides of the hall were lined with panelled doors, each door concealing a passage into a different part of the house. Papa had once described Westbrooke's home as labyrinthine; at the time I had smiled at this portentous description, but it seemed to me to have ominous overtones now. An acrid smell of smoke floated in the hallway, calling to my mind vague associations with Guy Fawkes Night. A faint hissing sound came from the fire burning somewhere upstairs in the building.

'Is anybody at home?' the Doctor called cheerily. His voice echoed around the hall and up the principal stairway.

'We should see where the fire is, Doctor,' said Jamie, making for the stairway but the Doctor placed a restraining hand on his arm.

'No, Jamie, not yet. I'd like to find the owner - Mr -' He looked at me enquiringly.

Westbrooke; I reminded him.

'Yes, I'd like to find Mr Westbrooke first and make sure he's safe. We'll deal with the fire in a moment. You said he lives alone, Victoria? Most unusual in a house of this size.'

'He wasn't always reclusive, Doctor. He was a brilliant man. At one time everyone in the English scientific community knew him.'

‘Really?’ asked the Doctor. He was gazing around the entrance hall, hands clasped together, and listening attentively. After a moment he appeared to hear some small sound - this was impressive, over the pervasive hiss of flames, and certainly neither Jamie nor I heard anything - and he hurried through one of the doorways on the left side of the entrance hall, while we trailed behind him

We passed through into an oak-panelled lobby. Here the Doctor pushed open the second door on the right, and together we entered what appeared to be a commodious and well-appointed study. My eyes were drawn at once to the large and beautiful oil painting of Claire Westbrooke that hung on the wall, so completely dominating the room that it seized my attention before the presence ofWestbrooke himself, crouching like a cornered animal behind his leather-topped writing desk. He was as immobile as his wife’s image in the painting: as immaculately dressed as I remembered him, and clean-shaven; but gaunt of countenance, with eyes that appeared terrified.

‘Mr Westbrooke?’ enquired the Doctor. Westbrooke, rising slowly to his feet, looked straight past him and at me with an expression of dawning recognition. ‘Victoria?’ he croaked. His voice seemed to have atrophied through lack ofuse. ‘My dear Victoria Maud?’

‘Sir Charles!’ I ran to him and grasped both his hands, which were cold despite the warmth of the evening. ‘Sir Charles, what on earth are you doing in here? A fire burns upstairs!’

‘You mustn’t concern yourself, my dear,’ Westbrooke said shakily. ‘The fire will not matter.’

‘Ach, now listen!’ cried Jamie, stepping forward. ‘We should do something about it before the whole place burns down!’

‘Yes, quite right,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘Now, some kind of extinguishing apparatus -’

Westbrooke registered my companions’ presence for the first time. ‘Who are these people, Victoria? Where is your father?’

I introduced the Doctor and Jamie, leaving Westbrooke's second question unanswered. Then I repeated my own question: 'What are you doing in here, Sir Charles?'

'They are hard to avoid,' was his reply.

'Who are?' asked the Doctor.

'They weren't expecting to come back,' Westbrooke said. 'Now that they have returned, they are much more aggressive than I anticipated.'

'Who?' asked Jamie, without the Doctor's patient tone.

'One of them overturned a candelabrum upstairs in the west wing,' Westbrooke said hoarsely. 'It wasn't intentional: I don't believe their thinking is so sophisticated. You mustn't concern yourself with the fire; perhaps it will burn itself out. And if it does not, perhaps that would be better.'

The Doctor placed a reassuring hand on Westbrooke's shoulder. Westbrooke did not object; indeed, he seemed not to notice the gesture. 'My dear fellow,' the Doctor said. 'Naturally your fire is your own business. But I do feel we should get you out of here; wouldn't you agree?'

'Aye,' said Jamie. 'We should go - it's no' safe here'

Westbrooke shook his head vigorously. 'They'll find me if I leave,' he said. 'They could be anywhere in the house by now.' And I recalled the conversation that Westbrooke had had with Papa on that September evening in 1864.

'You succeeded,' I said. 'Didn't you, Sir Charles?' The Doctor and Jamie both looked at me in bewilderment. In my hurried account of Westbrooke as we headed toward the house I had not recounted the details of his radical beliefs, nor made any reference to his stated intention to vindicate them experimentally.

'In the end, a slight change to the formula for the blood substitute

was all that was required,' said Westbrooke, addressing only me. 'It was ludicrously simple - a schoolboy might have thought of it. Electrically fortified erythrocytes in synthetic liquid medium. That was the modification waiting to be discovered through two years of research. Tonight I administered it to all my experimental subjects at once. I had had so many disappointments that I didn't even expect it to work. But now -'

'Experimental subjects?' enquired the Doctor.

"The animals you talked about?' I asked. 'Mammals, you told us.' By this point, that was what I was earnestly hoping for. But two years of research are a long time to a man ofWestbrooke's energy and self- discipline; I knew that he had already achieved partial successes with animals; and even before he shook his head gravely, I knew perfectly well that his researches would by now have advanced beyond the stage of experimentation on non-human subjects.

'What are you talking about?' Jamie asked Westbrooke exasperatedly. The expression on the Doctor's face indicated that he already knew.' Oh dear,' he said.

'They weren't expecting to come back,' Westbrooke repeated forlornly. 'How many of them are there?' asked the Doctor grimly.

'Six,' Westbrooke replied. 'Five men and one - one woman All the previous subjects I disposed of when necrosis could no longer be postponed.'

'Jamie. Victoria. Mr Westbrooke,' said the Doctor resolutely 'I think we should leave this room now, and address this problem without delay.'

Westbrooke was still in a state of shock, but his courage seemed somewhat bolstered by our company. I like to believe that his familiarity with me, a figure from a time when his life was still safe and predictable, heartened him at least as much as Jamie's formidable brawn or the Doctor's air of understated authority. Jamie and the Doctor each took one of Westbrooke's arms, and thus

supported he submitted to being led from the study, albeit in a state of trembling fear. We passed back through the lobby, an uncertain and anxious group of four, into the main hall, where the distant sound of burning could still be clearly heard.

‘We can leave now, can’t we Doctor?’ asked Jamie as we entered the hall. ‘Get Westbrooke to somewhere safe?’

It’s rarely that simple Jamie; said the Doctor grimly. His eyes were fixed on the far end of the long hall. We followed his gaze, and I perceived an indistinct shape moving in the shadows between two of Westbrooke’s ornamental suits of armour. Little could be seen of the figure at this range and in such gloom, but I was suddenly gripped by a powerful desire not to view it more closely. The man had not noticed our presence, and was apparently occupied in pushing himself without much force against one of Westbrooke’s suits of armour. He presented a curious spectacle: the image of a man who has somehow forgotten that one cannot pass through solid objects but must walk around them. Inevitably, after a few moments, the suit of armour toppled over with a gigantic metallic crash, sending pieces of itself clattering across the hallway. The sudden noise elicited an inarticulate cry of terror from Westbrooke, who turned and fled, disappearing through one of the doorways leading to the east wing of the house.

No; whispered Jamie, his eyes fixed upon the dark figure as it shambled aimlessly among the fallen ruins of the armour. ‘This isnae right. Doctor, I swear he’s not -’

With a heart-stopping crash, a door immediately to my right burst open and a bulky figure came lurching out of the doorway toward me. It was a man, obscenely fat, wearing a dishevelled suit and some form of novelty mask. As a little girl I had once seen a line of such masks on sale for All Souls’ Eve in an amusement emporium in Eastbourne; some represented witches, some trolls, some goblins; and they frightened the little children very effectively. The mask that this man was wearing seemed to be an especially gruesome example of its kind: pale green, with a loathsome fixed grin that appeared to result from the lips being too desiccated and immobile to cover the teeth. I caught a strong whiff of something that could

only be formaldehyde, and realised that the man was not wearing a mask at all.

My scream must have been ear-splitting. Heedless of my companions, I fled the length of the hall and shouldered my way through a door into the carpeted passageway beyond; whether or not I was following in Westbrooke's footsteps I was too panicked to know or care. Soon I was tripping down a dusty stone stairway illuminated only by one of the mounted brass oil lamps that Westbrooke appeared to keep lit throughout the house. Cobwebs clung to my face. I fell against the rough wooden door at the bottom of the stairway and pushed through it into the gloom beyond, my heart hammering in my chest.

I glanced around, panting, in the semi-darkness. A little light emanated from two more of the mounted oil lamps. I had entered Westbrooke's wine cellar: a large example of its kind, containing many tall wooden racks laden with dusty bottles, and everywhere thickly festooned in cobwebs. Presently I perceived that something was stirring behind one of the wooden cabinets, producing a restless shuffling sound; and then I heard a voice, speaking as through a mouthful of dirt, announce meaninglessly: 'You have been a wonderful wife, my dear.'

A figure shambled slowly from concealment, revealing itself in the half-light as a stooping, elderly man dressed in dirty-looking brown garments. It was immediately evident that, like the two creatures upstairs in the hallway, he was no longer a living person. His skin was grey and desiccated, and his eyes, lacking the lubricant to swivel them, stared unblinkingly ahead. The stench of preservative chemicals that arose from his body defies description.

I now realise it is quite true that one hears one's own heartbeat when gripped by the extremity of fear. As I backed away from the advancing figure, my breath seemed frozen in my lungs. With part of my mind I appreciated well enough that all

I had to do was to retreat through the door by which I had entered; but, gripped by horror at the sight of Westbrooke's resurrected creature, I behaved irrationally, and moved instead toward the rear

of the wine cellar, so that soon the old man stood between myself and my only exit.

‘You have been a wonderful wife, my dear,’ he said again, apparently addressing me; and I realised with a cold thrill of horror that he was simply repeating mindlessly, without sense or purpose the only remnant of human thought that still resided in his decaying brain: his final words in life. A picture of the old man’s dying moment flashed unbidden into my mind with the clarity of a daguerreotype: he would have lain upon his deathbed (in hospital rather than in his home, I felt sure), feeling no pain but only an overwhelming tiredness, and bade his wife a loving farewell before departing her company for what both would have considered the final time: You have been a wonderful wife, my dear. But he was back now

My terror was made perfect by the old man’s evident hostility, in contrast to the tenderness of his words. Now he was advancing more rapidly, his arms outstretched to grasp me. I shrieked at the top of my lungs, surprising myself with the power and pitch of the cry; and his right hand pressed over my mouth, as hard and cold as a slab of refrigerated meat. My attempts to thrust him away were wholly futile; he was functioning as a machine, an engine of cold flesh, and he was dreadfully strong. I closed my eyes above his probing, reeking fingers.

‘You have been a won-’ the old man slurred, and his hand dropped away from my face. I opened my eyes and squinted at him. Something had happened to his throat: specifically, a broad piece of metal now projected from it. I peered at the metal object and perceived that it was the tip of a heavy sword, which had stopped an inch short of transfixing me as well.

The metal tip shifted, and brown blood burst free of the old man’s neck and sprayed across my face, as cold as pond water. The old man slumped heavily to the stone floor of the cellar, wrenching the blade down with him; but Jamie still held on to the sword’s handle. I fell into his arms.

‘Victoria!’ he cried. We stumbled away from the twitching corpse.

‘Oh Jamie,’ I gasped against his shoulder. ‘I didn’t like that at all!’ Jamie pulled the sword free of the body. ‘Aye, he’s a mean-looking

beggar right enough. Good job your Mr Westbrooke likes his suits of armour, eh?’ He brandished the huge sword gracefully in spite of its enormous weight. ‘It’s a claymore, Victoria! I saw some blood spilt on Culloden’s field with one o’ these!’

As we moved together toward the door of the wine cellar, we heard a shuffling noise behind us, and turned to see the old man rising to his feet.

‘Ye’re a persistent divell, aren’t ye?’ Jamie exclaimed. He took a resolute pace towards the creature and hefted the sword, then with a powerful twisting motion swept its head cleanly from its body. I screamed as the severed head tumbled to the floor. The body slumped after it. I turned and dragged open the door of the wine cellar.

I realised that Jamie was not following. ‘Look!’ he yelled. I looked, and watched the headless body rise unsteadily to its feet.

‘Jamie, we have to go!’ I cried. ‘Now!’

But Jamie appeared hypnotised by the unreality of what he was seeing. Without doubt he was accustomed to violence, but not of this kind. ‘It’s no’ possible,’ he murmured.

‘Jamie, there’s no time! We must get out of here and back to the Doctor now!’

With a wordless yell Jamie attacked the corpse. He slammed the sword into it again and again, lopping it to pieces. Soon gory fragments littered the floor; but still they writhed and turned.

‘He won’t die,’ Jamie said quietly.

‘Jamie, the door’s open! We must go!’

But now the young Highlander had something new to stare at, as

did I. The pieces of the body were no longer moving randomly; they were writhing toward each other, as if attempting to reconstitute the human figure they had formerly composed. Failing in this, they were meeting and resealing in haphazard combinations: the joint of one shoulder fastened itself to the stump of the neck; a forearm sealed itself against a ragged wound in the torso. Within less than a minute the body had reassembled itself into an entirely new shape and struggled up from the floor, a dripping amalgam of fused human pieces, its four limbs thrashing in an uncoordinated fashion as it lurched toward us.

'Ye're right, Victoria,' Jamie said. The claymore slipped from his relaxing grip and clattered to the floor. 'We're leaving'

As we hurried back up the stairs, I breathlessly thanked Jamie for saving my life. It is a curious feeling to be so comprehensively indebted to another person; perhaps I should try to get used to it. We lost our way in our attempt to relocate the main hall, finding ourselves instead in Westbrooke's long oak-panelled dining room; but to our great reliefwe found the Doctor already there.

He scratched his head vigorously, ruffling his unruly mop of hair. 'Six of them,' he said to himself. Not an army, but - a distinct problem. Yes, a serious problem. Six of them somewhere in the house... '

'Well, Doctor,' said Jamie. 'You always have good ideas. What do we do now?'

The door at the opposite end of the dining room sprang open with a dull bang, and Westbrooke came stumbling backwards into the room. His hands were raised in front of his face, but tremblingly and without conviction, as if he were facing a threat he scarcely hoped to be able to parry. He did not notice us at first; his whole attention was occupied by his pursuer, who now unhurriedly entered the dining room after him. She was a middle-aged woman of striking beauty, with flowing auburn hair and a complexion as white as paper. Her voluptuous body was clad in a glossy black evening gown of the modern style, and diamonds glittered at her throat. I had met Claire Westbrooke on two occasions, but even had

I not, Westbrooke's late wife would have been impossible not to recognise from her portrait in his study.

I knew that Westbrooke's fanatical desire to revive the dead had been fuelled by the loss of his own wife; but the possibility of her actually figuring among his experimental subjects had literally never occurred to me. In hindsight my naivete astonishes me. Westbrooke's research had always been for Claire; in bringing her back he had merely done the most obvious thing.

Westbrooke backed slowly into the room, Claire keeping pace with him, until he encountered resistance in the form of the dining table; he stopped, and so did she. His eyes, stretched wide in an exaggerated expression of horror, gazed into the unfathomable black eyes of his wife. From her pale grey lips issued a question, muted by the unnatural dryness of her larynx, but still containing an unmistakable tone of alarm: 'Charles, what are you doing?'

I gasped loudly. Westbrooke turned to look at me, only at me, and his face was filled with a terrible guilt. I knew that his mind was collapsing under the pressure of the night's events, and an image came into my own mind that made me wish, just for a moment, to share in the release of his madness. It was an image too vivid and too terrible to bear: Claire Westbrooke at her dressing table one evening in 1864, disturbed by a sound behind her, looking up to see her husband; gazing at him, at first apathetically and then with dawning horror; and her last words - Charles, what are you doing? - a pitifully inadequate voicing of her dismay as Westbrooke's hands closed around her throat.

'You said she was killed by thieves; I said expressionlessly. Westbrooke was still looking at me as his wife's corpse embraced him. 'You know, Victoria,' he said, 'if she had fallen in love with another man I would just have let her go. I could have forgiven her that. But she wasn't having an affair. Her sense of honour would never have permitted it. She just no longer wanted me:

'Charles, what are you doing?' Claire asked again. Her delicate white hands clawed insistently at Westbrooke's body, and he did not resist them. 'We must help him!' cried Jamie.

‘We’re too late, Jamie; said the Doctor solemnly. ‘Much too late.’ Claire’s hands fastened around Westbrooke’s neck.

‘It was a beautiful discovery I made, Doctor!’ cried Westbrooke. A tear ran down his cheek. His statement was also a question; he was seeking the Doctor’s approval.

Claire snapped Westbrooke’s neck, forcibly enough to send the single tear flying off his face. Her head swivelled with an audible crackling of her cervical vertebrae, and she looked at me, as her husband had done. ‘Charles, what are you doing?’ she said.

A hand grasped mine. With my eyes fixed on Claire, I took a moment to realise that it was only the Doctor, anxious to lead me from the scene.

‘Come on, Victoria; he said. ‘We need to find Westbrooke’s chemical laboratory. Jamie! You too. We can’t stay here:

We ran. The Doctor had no difficulty in deducing that Westbrooke’s storehouse of chemicals would be on the ground floor; but either his luck or his knowledge of Georgian architecture must be considerable: he located the laboratory at the front of the house after only two incorrect guesses, and without our encountering any more of Westbrooke’s experimental subjects.

We entered the laboratory and looked cautiously around. I had expected to find bed-like trolleys of the kind used in hospitals or morgues, bearing hunched shapes beneath white sheets, or tanks of liquid containing human forms floating in translucent fluid; but nothing of the kind was to be seen. Perhaps Westbrooke kept such things in a second laboratory. As well as hundreds ofjars filled with different chemicals, the room did contain a large and ancient blackboard. From the narrow wooden shelf at its base the Doctor picked up a piece of white chalk and sucked it worriedly

‘We have to stop Westbrooke’s project here; he said to us. ‘Stop it completely, tonight. Not a trace of his research must remain - no one must ever hear of it. If the Victorians recoil from biology now,

the future progress of medicine will be impeded. All kinds of crucial discoveries will be delayed, perhaps never happen at all'

The Doctor turned to the blackboard and began shuffling steadily from left to right along it, his forehead wrinkled in concentration, the piece of chalk chattering against the board's surface as he scribbled a lengthy formula. He stood back for a moment to study his work, and then hurriedly added a second line of symbols beneath the first.

Jamie studied the blackboard with a perplexed expression. 'What is it, Doctor?' he asked.

The Doctor turned to us, his face grim. 'Something I hoped I'd never have to think about again,' he said. He put one arm around Jamie's shoulders and another around mine. 'Now listen very carefully, you two. There are certain discoveries that are better not made. Mr Westbrooke found that out this evening. On the blackboard is another example:

'A chemical formula?' I guessed.

'Instructions for making a very special chemical,' said the Doctor, his mouth tight with distaste. 'The invention of one of my own people. Something that I campaigned for years to have banned where I come from - successfully I might add: he said with a brief gleam of pride, gripping his lapels and beaming at us both. Then his face darkened again. 'It's a weapon. I believe its inventor euphemistically termed it a disruption agent. A catalyst that converts vertebrate blood into acid'

'Catalyst?' Jamie enunciated the word cautiously, no doubt experiencing the unwelcome sensation that events were slipping away from him again.

'Yes, Jamie. Within two or three seconds of mixing with blood, it produces a flurry of molecular activity too vigorous to reverse, a runaway chemical reaction. Only trace amounts of it are required to produce the effect, and the elegant part is that the substance itself undergoes no permanent chemical change. An exquisitely vicious

solution to a very old problem - how to kill your enemy before he has the opportunity to kill you:

I was a little taken aback. ‘But why would you memorise the formula for a beastly thing like that?’

‘I didn’t, Victoria. Some things you tend not to forget’

With an uncomfortable feeling of premonition, I asked: ‘How strong is, the acid - the acid that it makes of your blood?’

But the Doctor only looked at me with the sad eyes of one who has not the heart to answer a question, for fear of the hurt the answer might cause.

‘Are you going to use it, Doctor?’ Jamie asked with unseemly eagerness.

The Doctor rubbed his chin. All the constituent liquids are present in this laboratory. It would simply be a matter of combining them in the right sequence and the right proportions. I don’t like it one little bit, but I’m not sure Westbrooke’s experimental subjects can be stopped in another way.’

‘How long will it take to make, Doctor?’ I asked.

‘Its inventor spent several hours carefully mixing the chemicals to make the sample that I saw tested.’ The Doctor gazed around the laboratory at the glass jars and bottles cramming the wooden shelves. ‘But under these circumstances, I could hurry. Do it in say - eight to ten minutes: Jamie and I exchanged a sceptical glance: With two laboratory assistants to fetch me the chemicals I ask for.’

‘What will we do when we’ve got it, Doctor?’ asked Jamie: Throw it at the beasties?’

‘No, Jamie, that wouldn’t work. The chemical itself isn’t acidic. We need a delivery system to introduce it intravenously. That’s the real problem.’

‘A rifle that fires tranquiliser darts,’ I said.

The Doctor turned to me, appearing slightly surprised. ‘Yes, quite right, Victoria! Something like a tranquiliser rifle. I really should be able to improvise one. Now, a few basic components -’

‘No, Doctor,’ I said. Westbrooke has one - I mean had one. He used to hunt wild animals on safari when he was a young man’ I clearly remembered being shown the rifle on one of my visits to the house. As a hunter Westbrooke had enjoyed the chase, but had had mixed feelings about the kill; lacking the appetite for slaughter, he had often used the elegant American firearm to bring down his quarry without having to kill it. I mentioned the gun now with a curious spirit of reluctance; this nominating of an appropriate weapon made me wholly complicit in the night’s horrors, and for an instant I seemed to feel, as it were, the posthumous disappointment of my parents.

‘Can you remember where the rifle is?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Mounted in the main hallway, among many other firearms,’ I told him.

‘Really?’ said the Doctor gloomily. ‘How providential’

‘Will it work, Doctor?’ asked Jamie enthusiastically.

‘Well,’ replied the Doctor, ‘such devices are apparently useful for subduing wild animals. I suppose we’re going to see what happens when we turn this one to a slightly different purpose.’

Within fifteen minutes we were on our way back to the main hall. The Doctor, gripping a vial of brownish liquid, seemed to be mastering the layout of the house very quickly now. The rifle was quickly removed from its mounted glass case, which Jamie appeared to take some pleasure in smashing. The liquid the Doctor had synthesised, in itself harmless to the touch, was substituted without difficulty for the calmative chemical in the small black darts that we also retrieved from the case. When the rifle was properly loaded, Jamie took charge of it. Naturally there was no

question of my being offered the gun, but it was only later that I realised there was never any question of the Doctor's taking it either; a rifle would have looked more incongruous in his hands than in mine

'Now we must search the house,' the Doctor said. 'Jamie, be ready to use that weapon each time we encounter one of Westbrooke's subjects.'

'Aye, Doctor,' he said as we began our progress from room to room. 'Ye can count on me'

We entered Westbrooke's library. It was one of the largest rooms in his house, and its contents would have done justice to a small public library. It was even arranged like one: the many thousands of books accumulated by Westbrooke could not all be accommodated in the shelves covering the walls from floor to ceiling, so he had added freestanding bookcases to house the rest of his collection.

The library had a visitor: a young man, thickset and thuggish in appearance, was stumbling toward us down its main aisle. He was dressed in a cheap-looking grey suit with a dirty white shirt beneath; both jacket and shirt were open at the throat. His face was pale yellow, and the ugly smudge of a bruise darkened the whole left side of his neck. His left arm was raised toward us, the fingers clawing at the air, while his right arm hung at his side, its fingers twitching spasmodically. He was closing the distance between us at a pace that left little time for thought.

I screamed - loudly, I suppose. It served to clear my head. But Jamie, holding the tranquiliser rifle, appeared mesmerised. 'Jamie,' the Doctor said carefully. 'When I say shoot, shoot'

The dead man raised his other arm. His mouth opened. 'Go to hell,' he said.

A cold wave of horror rolled over me. These had been the man's last words in this world, or so he had planned; and in an instant they indicated to me the meaning of the bruise on his neck. The noose had pressed deeply as he thrashed beneath the scaffold; but his final

words - go to hell - had been spat belligerently into the faces of his executioners a second before the lever was pulled.

‘Shoot,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘They cannae be killed, Doctor,’ Jamie whispered.

‘Shoot! Jamie, pull the trigger.’

Jamie was staring, as if mesmerised, directly into the dried-out eyes of the advancing young man He was still clutching the tranquiliser rifle but appeared to have forgotten all about it; its barrel was wavering visibly.

‘Go to hell,’ the young man said again. His mouth did not close properly this time; his lower jaw remained hanging down in an expression of surprise as he reached out his groping hands toward us.

‘Jamie, now!’ cried the Doctor. The Highlander did not respond.

I surprised myself by what I did next, but I relate my actions without embellishment. I took a pace forward and plucked the rifle from Jamie’s hands. He surrendered it without resistance or comment. I raised the rifle, braced the stock against my shoulder, aimed carefully at the young man’s bare throat, and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp pop, reminiscent of the sound of a child’s toy gun, and a small black dart appeared at the man’s Adam’s apple. A trickle of brownish liquid emerged from beneath it: whether the man’s unnaturally fortified blood or the Doctor’s ‘very special chemical’ I had no way of telling. The man stopped in his tracks, his cold right hand reaching out to brush against my face. We took a step backward, as did he.

‘Go to hell; he said, raising dead fingers to claw feebly at the dart embedded in his throat.

‘Don’t look; was the Doctor’s advice; it went unheeded on this occasion. We could not tear our eyes away from the figure of the young man. In my mind I heard the question I had put to the Doctor

earlier, repeated quite distinctly in my own voice: How strong is the acid? That was the question the Doctor had chosen not to answer. But a voice in my mind, not the Doctor's, now supplied a species of reply, something half remembered from a fairy tale Papa had used to enjoy reading to me when I was a little girl: All the better to eat you with, my dear

The young man raised both hands to touch his face, and then shakily lowered them again. He appeared to be weeping soundlessly: tears of brownish liquid, like dirty pond water, disengaged themselves from his eyes and coursed down his cheeks. Soon a trickle of the same liquid was seen at one corner of his slackly open mouth: one comer, and then the other. He made a curious whining sound that seemed to emanate from deep within his chest, and took two more unsteady steps backwards, until he was leaning drunkenly against one of Westbrooke's well-stocked bookcases.

'I don't think I want to see; I said; but I did not look away or close my eyes.

More brown tears slid down the young man's face, and presently his eyeballs became detached from their sockets and followed them. His nose softened into an irregular shape, and a moment later his jaw dislocated with a moist snap and dropped clear of his face, catching in the folds of his shirt. His whole body seemed to be shifting and rearranging itself beneath his clothes, from which thin plumes of yellowish steam were beginning to rise. His hands were changing too: the fingernails unpeeled one by one and pattered to the floor, while the flesh of the hands was liquefying, revealing the white bones of metacarpus and phalanges within. The body settled itself more firmly against the bookcase. The volumes whose titles were readable were mostly textbooks of human biology, I noticed absently. The comical aptness of this seemed to liberate me to look away, and in that moment I saw on the Doctor's face the most desolate expression of sadness and regret I have ever seen.

When I looked back at the young man his scalp was sliding forwards over his forehead like a ludicrously unconvincing hairpiece, and both of his ears had now come away; one of them

rested incongruously on his left shoulder like an epaulette. Then his face collapsed into a flood of gore, and his whole body, steaming ferociously inside its sizzling clothes, sank back into the bookcase and passed cleanly through it, melting a man-shaped hole through wood and paper, and falling out of view on the far side with a liquid crash.

The noise broke Jamie's trance. 'I'm sorry, Victoria,' he said. He was apologising for his earlier paralysis; but that seemed a long time ago. He took the rifle gently back from me.' I can finish this now. You can trust me.'

At the far side of the library we entered the corridor that terminated in the second stairway, which led up to the guest bedrooms on the middle floor. We moved together through room after room, seeking to be as systematic as possible; but some of the rooms on this floor were out of bounds now, filled with smoke or fully ablaze as the fire from the top floor spread steadily through the house, everywhere fuelled by the wooden furnishings in which Westbrooke had invested so much.

We spent a bleak and nightmarish hour tracking down the remainder of Westbrooke's subjects. I must not dwell on it; in the end we located them all. Poor Jamie, desperate to redeem himself after his loss of nerve in the library, made sure he dispatched each creature with the rifle before it could come close enough to us to express its bewilderment through violence. The fat man who had so terrified me in the hallway was in Westbrooke's bedroom, where he had torn most of the linen to ribbons and was found stuffing fragments of shredded pillowcase into his mouth. Two shadowy creatures we located together in the scullery, staring blankly at each other as if each was silently trying to remember the other's name; one of them had been clawing repeatedly at its own face in a mindless spasmodic motion, opening a ragged wound in its cheek from which brown blood was steadily pulsing. The haphazard amalgam of human parts from the wine cellar was found gambolling blindly in a corridor on the middle floor, crashing repeatedly against the walls; at some point it had caught fire, but it was still highly mobile.

Claire Westbrooke took longer to find. She had made her way to her husband's study, and by the time we found her she had raked her long fingernails down the portrait of herself so many times that she had ravaged both her hands and the picture. Jamie's aim never faltered, and each of Westbrooke's experimental subjects went the way of the young man in the library. The sights and sounds of each grisly act of destruction will haunt me throughout my life.

We could not have afforded to take any longer about our business. (Throughout our search we were conscious of the fire securing its grip on the house at an accelerating pace, and when we returned from the study to the main hall, the thick carpet running down the principal stairway was fiercely ablaze, filling the hall with thick grey smoke.

'You two must get out of here now,' said the Doctor urgently: Wait for me outside. The fire will spread to Westbrooke's laboratory in a few minutes, and I must make one last trip there first.'

'Why?' I asked.

'One more recipe I'd like to try,' said the Doctor. 'All of Westbrooke's notes and equipment, every trace of what he discovered, must be utterly destroyed. We can't trust a conventional house fire to accomplish that. But if my rather rusty knowledge of chemistry serves me one more time, I think I can make sure no one ever learns what happened here tonight:

'There's no time for any clever stuff, Doctor!' protested Jamie. 'The whole house is going to go up!'There was no disputing this; the smoke in the hallway was catching in our throats and making our eyes water, and the noise of burning was deafening now, roaring at us from every side. But the Doctor was already hurrying towards the laboratory. Jamie and I left by the main door and hurried hand in hand down the stone steps, gratefully gasping in lungfuls of the night air, which, though smelling increasingly like a bonfire, seemed fresh by comparison with the air inside the house.

At what we deemed a safe distance, we crouched down behind a row of box-bushes and anxiously watched the spread of the fire,

waiting for the Doctor to come out. Plumes of orange flame were visible on all three storeys of the house now, and many of the windows splintered and burst in the intense heat, releasing floods of white smoke into the night.

After an almost unbearable period ofwaiting, the Doctor appeared at the main door, glanced quickly around and then scurried down the stone stairway. He dashed across the several expanses of lawn that Jamie and I had crossed, his limbs appearing rather uncoordinated in a way that suggested that running did not come naturally to him. He threw himself down next to us, then we three crouched together behind Westbrooke's box-bushes and watched in grim fascination as his house burned. Presently the flames reached the chemical laboratory on the ground floor, and the room abruptly exploded with a coughing roar that sprayed fragments ofwood and glass across the lawn.

'It's over,' said Jamie, and got to his feet. But the Doctor reached up and dragged him impatiently back to the ground. 'Not yet, Jamie,' said the Doctor. 'The fuse is lit; that's all.'

So we settled down again to watch the house. The explosion in the laboratory had established new fires in adjacent rooms, and everywhere Westbrooke's residence was consuming itself in heat and violence. I opened my mouth to enquire what the Doctor had meant by 'the fuse is lit', then thought better of it. I had already witnessed the efficacy of the chemistry that the Doctor carried in his head: chemistry from a place where science and magic had become indistinguishable, where anything was possible. Chemistry of that kind could be relied upon to work.

Perhaps Jamie's thoughts followed different lines to my own; or perhaps he was less patient than I. Whatever his reason, he opened his mouth to ask the Doctor what we were waiting for.

'What -' Jamie began, and at that moment Westbrooke's entire house came apart, unfolding itself into the night. In one breathless moment the building was standing, burning but intact; in the next came an immense explosion that disintegrated every part of it at once, and a thousand million fragments of wood, plaster, stone and

glass were propelled outward by a raging ball of fire that glowed pure white. For a while there was nothing in the universe but airborne debris. Then, as the ball of fire dissipated, we saw that no trace remained of the structure of the house: it had been eradicated to its foundations. We climbed unsteadily to our feet while the fragments were still falling, too small and too light to drop quickly, pattering gently into our hair and onto our shoulders like rain.

I looked at Jamie, whose mouth was still open in the act of phrasing his redundant question; then at the Doctor, who in his moment of triumph simply looked tired. ‘Complete thermal site erasure; he remarked to no one in particular. ‘Well, that’s that:

I shall not go back to 1866 again. The Doctor tells me that in my future, ‘Victorian’ becomes a byword for progress and innovation, that the revolutions of thought instigated by my people change the future of the world. And ‘Victorian’ once signified to me so much that was special: fragrant summer gardens, elegant homes and cheerful welcomes, libraries with their atmosphere of curiosity and optimism, seaside resorts with their briny smell and their gaudy mechanical slot machines; pursuing childish games in the schoolyard, marvelling at the ingenuity of clockwork toys, riding in horse-drawn trams, strolling by the river in the park at sundown.

But my mind has been changed. ‘Victorian’ now calls to mind only the squalid deaths of my beloved father and of the foolish murderer Westbrooke, each seeking to achieve immortality as a benefactor of the human species, and each crucified by his own ambition. In an age whose defining characteristic is intellectual pride, there is no home for someone like me. My home henceforth must be the TARDIS, and each new environment that materialises around it. My family will be Jamie and the Doctor, I am set on it; if I cannot love my native time, I will love them instead.

Short Trips: Repercussions

I'm terribly proud of this collection (confession time, the original idea of using an airship was John Ainsworth's, not mine) - you see I just wanted to do a book like those old Amicus films, where loads of people walk into a room and tell their life stories. Then they discover they're dead, or in hell or on top of a bus to nowhere or whatever. I love those kinds of things. Indeed, I think my main inspiration for this collection was an old play I once acted in where some people aboard a boat are being taken to somewhere to pay for their some sins and tell the Steward behind the bar their stories (he's been on the boat forever!). To this day I can't remember the name of the play but it appealed to me when I was ten and have wanted to explore those themes ever since.

Looking at Repercussions today, there really isn't a duff story in the book, every writer rose to the occasion magnificently and told a story that was part of a bigger whole and yet ensured it could be read separately if need be. And among my other intentions for this book was to try to bring in some newer voices, fresh to the Big Finish stable - Andy Frankham-Allen being one of them. I thought the tone, the angst and the resolution of this particular story not only showed people that Andy is a top writer, but encapsulated in a few thousand words the essence of what these people's individual stories were all about and made the book work exactly as I'd always hoped it would.

Repercussions was an honour to edit because I was helped so much by a team of writers who fed back and forth into one another's stories, everyone happy to tweak a line or paragraph if need be, to link stuff together. And add to that a cover so simple but so evocative (sorry, no disrespect to Clayton or Richard or any of the other artists, but Stuart Manning's covers are, for me, the best - Repercussions aside, look at imagination of Time Signature or the ingenuity of Snapshots or the simplicity of The History of Christmas, such gorgeous art) and this is a package I'm still proud to hold up and show people as an example of how brilliant Big Finish has been at keeping Doctor Who alive and innovative over

the last ten years.

Gary Russell

The Dead Man's Story
Andrew Frankham

Jake Morgan looked up from the television upon hearing the front door opening. A big smile spread across his face, and he switched the TV to mute. He leant his neck back so that he could see the hallway through the open door.

'Hi, Fables!' he called.

There was no answer. Jake just smiled more. His girlfriend was up to something, or else she would have replied. He listened as she pottered about in the kitchen. He closed his eyes, imagining her emptying the shopping bags and putting things away. In his mind he could see her reaching the top shelves, her jumper climbing up her back to reveal a tantalising glimpse of the tattoo on her lower spine. He sighed. He was a very lucky man.

'Get your mind out of that gutter, you.'

Jake opened his eyes. Fay was standing before him, having managed to enter the room without him noticing. Despite having been at work all day she looked radiant, unlike most days when she usually looked very drawn. As usual she had her long chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing her woolly jumper and faded black jeans.

'It's a nice gutter to be in,' Jake said.

At this Fay screwed up her face. 'Oh my god, I can't believe you just said that! *You* are so corny.'

'Well, you know me, I'm a hopeless romantic. It's why you love me,' Jake said, making a silly face at his girlfriend.

'Yeah.' Suddenly Fay looked a little embarrassed. She placed one hand in her jeans' pocket and looked at the silent TV 'You know it's a leap year?' She turned back to him and he nodded in reply. 'Know

what that means?'

Jake pursed his lips together and shrugged.

'It means I get to do this.' She removed her hand from her pocket and lowered herself to one knee. It was only then that Jake noticed that she was holding a little box, from which she removed a ring. She placed the box on the floor, took Jake's hand in hers, and looked him directly in the eyes. 'Will you marry me?'

Jake's reaction was instant. 'Yes, oh, yes'

Fay's face fell, and she released his hand. 'Oh. You were supposed to say no.'

'I was?' He could not hide the confusion in his voice.

'Yeah, it's tradition. The woman proposes on a leap year, the man refuses and then he has to buy her a silk dress to make up for it. I wanted a lovely silk dress.' It was only then that Fay smiled, her eyes glinting, and poked him playfully in the stomach.

Jake laughed and hugged her. 'You nutter,' he said, and helped her put the ring on his finger; he then reached forward and kissed her. 'You'll have the best silk dress ever,' he promised.

Jake Morgan was buoyantly crossing the road when, through the driving rain, he saw a most unusual sight.

A blue box was standing next to the entrance of the petrol station. Above the doors, one of which was open, were the words 'Police Public Call Box'. Jake had only seen such a box in one place before, although he had no idea what it was for, really. He knew that it had not been standing there the previous night when he had popped over to the garage for some Pepsi, which left him wondering why anyone would place it there during the small hours of the morning.

His natural curiosity taking over, he approached the police box to take a peek inside. As he drew nearer he heard a voice from within. It was a man's voice, sounding old and drawn. Jake stopped,

caution superseding his curiosity

‘Yes, Jeremy, that one. No, not that one! *That* one there!’ the man said, sounding rather peeved.

There was a bang and a flash of light. Jake’s hands instinctively rose to cover his eyes, but they could not protect him from the jet of cold air that shot out of the police box. Blasted back, he hit the ground with a crack as his spine collided with the stone paving slabs. Despite the pain that was coursing through his body, part ofJake’s mind could still make out a younger male voice coming from nearby.

‘Oh, I say!’ it said.

Jake lay there for a moment, while the pain subsided to a manageable level. He flexed his fingers and placed his palms on the ground. Slowly he pushed down, attempting to lift his back and expecting much pain for his troubles. He was surprised by the lack of feeling, pain or otherwise, and got to his feet very slowly, just in case.

He looked up and stepped back in surprise. There was a man emerging from the police box, looking at him uncertainly. Jake narrowed his eyes at the man’s choice of clothing. Despite the frilly shirt, the way he dressed gave the man an elegant air, enhanced by the fine mane of white hair on top of his lined face.

The man smiled broadly and held a hand out. ‘Sorry about that, old chap, Jeremy is a bit clumsy, but he means well.’

Jake smiled. ‘I’m fine, mate, probably end up with a sore…’

No sooner had Jake started speaking than the man’s expression changed from happy and helpful to confused. He ran a finger across his lips and his eyebrows crossed together. Shaking his head, the man stepped back inside the police box.

‘Oh, well don’t mind me,’ Jake muttered, annoyed by the man’s reaction. He marched over to the police box, but before he could set

foot inside the door slammed shut.

‘Hey!’ He shouted and went to slam a fist on the door. His hand passed right through its surface and a strange wheezing and groaning filled the air around him. He stood back, stunned, and cast about for the source of the noise. The sound died down and Jake returned his attention to the blue box, only to find that it was no longer there.

‘Bloody hell.’ He stretched his arms out before him, half expecting to feel the solid mass against his palms, but there was nothing. ‘What was all that about?’ he wondered, unsure whether he had imagined the whole episode or not.

Jake Morgan stepped up to the front door a couple of hours later, still a little baffled by the strangeness of the evening so far. It had started off wonderfully enough, but after his possible daydream by the garage and the strange non-reaction from Robert in town, he was beginning to wonder what more could happen before he went to bed.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his key and moved to insert it into the lock. His hand continued into the door and out the other side. Jake pulled back quickly only to find that there was no key in his hand after all. He glanced down at his trousers and noticed the shape of the key still inside his tight pocket.

His brow knitted tightly and he looked at the door before him.

With the police box he was almost certain he had made the whole thing up. That there had never been a police box, which is why his hand has passed through it, but this time...

There was no denying what had just happened.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed, and watched his hand sink into the door. He whistled out a breath of amazement.

‘Damn,’ he said, closing his eyes, and walked forward.

Despite everything Jake still expected to have his nose squashed by the solid door, and was only half surprised when this did not happen. Instead he passed through the wooden door and came out in the small hallway beyond.

'Fay!' he called out, but no reply was forthcoming. All he could hear was the soft sounds of music drifting from the living room. He was about to go check it out when he remembered his shoes. Both he and Fay had agreed at the beginning that shoes were not to be worn indoors.

He knelt down to remove his trainers only to discover that he could not get a grip on them. As with the door his hand passed through the leather *and* his foot, into the floor below. His lifted his hand out of the floor and stood up again, his heart rate increasing.

The first hint of a suspicion was forming in his mind, and he did not like it.

He took a tentative step onto the carpet then raised his foot. Where there should have been a muddy shoeprint there was nothing. He inspected the sole of his shoe, and was unsurprised to discover that there was no mud there, despite the stormy weather outside and the fact that he had cut across the grass to get home and out of the rain.

Just a sec, he said and rushed down the hallway to the mirror on the far wall. If it was raining then surely he should have been wet.

He looked into the mirror, and caught his breath at the sight that greeted him. Despite his fears he could see himself in the mirror, but only just. What he saw was a shadow of himself. He still looked like him, but he could see the reflection of the hallway through his semi-transparent body. He ran his hand through his, very dry, blonde hair and his reflection mimicked the action. No contact was made, and he watched with a strange mixture of horror and amazement as his hand went below his hair and into his skull. He twiddled his fingers and was relieved to discover that he could not feel the insides of his head. It was a small consolation.

He thought back to his trip into town, and how Robert had ignored

him. At the time Jake had just assumed that his best mate was in a huff about something, maybe simply stressed out because of the long hours he was working, but now, looking at himself in the mirror, Jake was beginning to suspect otherwise. Could it be that Robert had not seen Jake because he was...

Jake shivered. He could not complete that thought.

For a moment he closed his eyes. When he opened them again he almost jumped in shock. Fay stood before the mirror. She was brushing her hair, whistling along with the tune playing in the living room. Seeing her eyes smile, Jake's heart melted as the love he felt for her overtook his reasoning. The deep feeling was soon replaced when he noticed that both of them were occupying the same space.

Jake staggered back a few paces.

Fay still remained before the mirror, completely oblivious to that fact that she had, only a second earlier, been standing *inside* Jake.

'Fay... ' he began, but could not find any other words to say. Even if he could, he doubted that she would be able to hear him. He opened his mouth to try again. He had to say something. If anyone would be able to hear him and see him it should be her. They had been through so much together in the previous two years, and he had to believe that their love counted for something. As it turned out he did not need to speak for it was then that Fay turned around. Their eyes met. For several seconds they lingered, and Jake stopped breathing.

The moment passed and Fay continued into the living room. Jake remained where he was standing, his mind awash with the thought that she had seen him. There had been an unmistakable recognition in her eyes.

He followed her into the room and watched as she switched CDs. 'Fay, I know you saw me then Even if it was just for a second. Come on, babe, look at me again.'

She did not.

He stood there, thinking, and an idea came to him. He walked up behind Fay and leant forward until his mouth was just behind her ear. Slowly, and gently, he blew. Nothing happened. Not a single strand of Fay's hair moved. She stood up and walked over to the sofa, passing through Jake as she did so. He straightened up and turned to watch her.

Jake was not sure how much time passed while he stood there. She listened to her classical music while reading several chapters of Marcel Theroux's latest novel, and then turned the TV on to watch the news. In all that time not once did she look at Jake. Several times he tried to speak to her, but she gave no sign of hearing him. As time passed by Jake's heart sunk further and further. He could not help but think that she was ignoring him on purpose, like Robert had been doing.

He walked across the room, passing through her line of vision, and stood by the window. Outside, the world continued to turn. He stood there for a time, lost in his thoughts. Things would not have seemed so bad if only Fay would acknowledge him, as it was...

'Yes, he went straight there to tell you. You really haven't seen him?'

The words drifted into his thoughts. He turned to see Fay on the phone, a look of concern on her face. He moved forward and knelt before her. She looked right through him, but nonetheless Jake reached out a hand to comfort her. For a split second he had forgotten about his condition and was, as a result, taken aback when his hand passed through her leg. Jake pulled away as if stung.

'Come off it, you're pulling my leg, right? He's been gone for four hours, Rob.' Fay paused while Robert said something. She smiled. 'Yes, we've got engaged! And we've set a date for the wedding.'

Jake sighed, as the tears built up in his eyes. Seeing the smile on Fay's face was too much. He thought back to the moment they had agreed to get married. After he had promised to buy her a silk dress

they had hugged. In that moment he felt like he was one with her, more so than he ever did when they made love. He sighed again. How could the wedding ever happen now?

'Yes, a date,' Fay was saying, the happiness in her voice slowly diminishing. 'He'd better bloody get back soon, though, otherwise we'll seriously have to rethink the whole thing.'

His heart aching, he turned to leave his home.

Jake Morgan stood at the edge of the pavement, waiting for the lights to change. People were shuffling into position behind him. Some of them, the more impatient ones, were barging forward, intent on being the first ones across the road, as if there was some kind of prize for getting there first. He hated the way people in London pushed each other aside, as if no one else existed but them He took a glance behind him, just in time to notice a very large man shove forward. Jake braced himself, not wanting to be pushed onto the road and as a consequence into the oncoming traffic. Once more he had forgotten his new condition, and was reminded when the large man stepped inside him.

Without any further thought Jake crossed the road, elated with the knowledge that nothing could hurt him. Not even the double decker that was racing towards him.

Once he was across the road his mind went back to Fay. Being around her and not being able touch her was more than he could stomach, which was why he was now on the streets of Hammersmith, hoping the distance from Fay would relieve a little of that pain. Darkness had fallen since he had returned home, which provided Jake with the illusion that it was later than it really was.

He turned onto King Street, and was happy to see that there were few people about. It was a Friday, which meant that soon the road would be bustling with people; some heading to and from the Lyric Theatre, others coming out to have a pizza. He liked to come here on a weekend evening, it was one of the rare occasions that he felt that Londoners became aware of each other. As it was the few

people presently on King Street were so caught up in their own lives that they barely had time to notice the people around them. Jake remembered many mornings' walks to work, feeling like he was invisible.

Now he really was, and that made Jake smile.

Part of him knew that he could have some fun with his new status. Being really invisible in a city of people who might as well be invisible could be fun. He could do so much and get away with so many things. He could help himself to whatever he wanted, never having to worry about being caught. He could become Fay's guardian angel, protecting her from anyone who tried to hurt her.

He came to a stop outside of a burger bar, and watched through the windows at the people eating. It had been hours since he had last eaten, yet he did not feel the slightest bit hungry. That did not come as much of a surprise to him. The dead did not need to eat, after all.

He had to accept that small but important fact. He was dead; it was the only explanation for what had happened when he visited Robert, and for when he had returned home. As he thought back he realised that only one event could account for his present state of being. The incident at the police box. Whatever happened had happened then, and he was sure now that he had not imagined it.

That blast of air, that flash of light, somehow it must have killed him.

His heart dropped at that thought. In his mind he could see Fay talking to Robert on the phone, smiling as she told him about the wedding. *Well, it ain't gonna happen now, is it?* He took a deep breath as his eyes began to well up.

He turned away from the burger bar and blinked away the tears, and his eyes made contact with a familiar face. It was the man from the police box. Still dressed in frilly shirt and green velvet jacket, the man was standing outside the chemist looking directly at Jake. If there was any doubt, the fact that he could see Jake was confirmed when the man smiled at him.

‘Oi, pal!’ Jake called out.

The man’s smile faded quickly, and he raised a hand to his left ear. He frowned as he fiddled with his ear, then shook his head. Looking extremely annoyed the man turned and began to walk away.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Jake said and set off after the man.

Despite his attempts to attract the man’s attention, Jake was ignored. It was as if he were not there, which, Jake realised, was true; although he could not ignore that fact that just like the last time he had seen the man, the man had, at first, shown signs of seeing Jake.

Side by side they walked down King’s Street. Jake had no intention of leaving the man’s side; whoever this man was, he knew something about what was going on and Jake wanted to know as well.

They turned the corner into Macbeth Street, and once they had neared the school that stood there, Jake noticed the police box in an alley alongside a block of flats.

Jake smiled. At last they were getting somewhere.

The man crossed the road and entered the police box. As he stepped inside a voice greeted him. Any luck, Doctor?’

‘I’m afraid not, Jeremy. Almost, though.’ The man sighed. ‘And I was nearly... ‘

However he ended that sentence was lost to Jake, as the man closed the door behind him. With a grin Jake stepped forward, knowing full well he could step straight into the box, and find out what the man who Jeremy called ‘Doctor’ was up to. Step through he did, and came out of the other side.

He span around in surprise. ‘What’s going on?’

Just as he was about to try again, the light on top of the box started flashing and the curious wheezing noise began to rise again.

'No, wait!' Jake called out, but the police box faded from sight before his eyes.

While he was walking with the Doctor the possibility that he was not alone had become real, and with it came the hope that maybe he could still marry Fay. If the Doctor had been able to see him, if only for a few moments, then maybe he could cure Jake, too. But along with the disappearance of the police box went his hopes.

He looked up to the dark sky above and shouted out. 'Oh, god! Please don't let me be alone!'

Jake Morgan spent another hour sitting on the wet grass in Ravenscourt Park, not that the dampness below him was a problem. *The joy of being dead,* he thought bitterly.

For a while, after the police box had gone, he had considered wandering around Hammersmith, but he could not stomach the thought of being among so many people yet being so alone. So he decided to take some time out in the park, closed as it was, in the hope that the isolation would not seem so obvious. For the most part it worked.

Every now and then he would notice a group of people walking down the street next to the park, laughing and joking as they started their night out. Memories of such nights out with Fay, Robert (and his latest fling) would rush unwanted into Jake's mind.

Ahead of him, above the arches, the occasional train would hurry past, through Ravenscourt Park Station (closed at weekends) and on to Hammersmith. Silhouettes of people in the train could be seen from where Jake sat. All those people together, ignoring each other, not realising the wonderful gift they had. The gift of sharing their lives with other people.

In the moments when there were no people and no trains he would consider some deep philosophical thoughts, which was most unlike

him. When he had been alive he had never been a religious man, quite content to be his own boss, and unwilling to contemplate that there was a plan for his life other than the one he created himself. Now he was dead he found himself thinking about such things.

Was there really more to this life? Considering his current predicament he would hope so. But if that was so then why was he still here, walking the earth as a ghost? Jake did not know. He knew very little about ghosts, beyond what he saw in horror films. He refused to accept that for the rest of his time (eternity?) he would have to haunt people. If he was a ghost, Jake rationalised, then what about all the others who died? Was he really the only ghost in Hammersmith? He did not think so, after all there must have been loads of people who had died in the area. Muggings that had gone wrong, old folk in their beds, and as for the people who must have died in Charing Cross Hospital...

This led him to consider something he had once heard. Something about how ghosts were dead spirits who had to make peace with their former lives so they could move on to the next life. Jake did not know the specifics, he did not need to know, but it made sense to him right now, sitting alone in the park.

He stood up. There were scores left unsettled in his life, between him and his father. Jake had not seen him in many years, not since they had moved the old man into the nursing home. They had never really been close, but in hindsight, she realised, that was no excuse to not go and visit.

Jake stood up and started for the way out. Before the night was over he was determined to resolve some things so that he could move on to whatever was next.

As he walked one other thing came to his mind. Somehow he would have to sort things out with Fay, let her know what he felt...

Jake Morgan looked down at his father, lying in the bed, looking frailer than Jake had ever seen him. His dad was asleep, his breathing shallow and irregular

‘I just wanted to drop by and say I’m sorry, Dad. I should have visited you before now, so we could both make our peace. Well, my peace, since it was me who shut you out of my life. So much has happened since I last saw you.’ Jake smiled. ‘Got engaged today. You’d like her. Fay’s lovely, and she’s got a wicked sense of humour. We’re gonna get married in…’ Jake stopped himself ‘We *were* going to get married, but… well, bit difficult since I’m dead.’ He shook his head. ‘I should have visited you sooner, Dad, I really should have. But I was such a prick back then. It’s my fault, isn’t it, this trouble with your heart? I broke it when I betrayed you… ‘ He reached up to wipe away the tear that fell, but could not. Jake wanted to be strong about everything, but he felt so exhausted. What he wanted most of all was to be held, to be comforted by his dad. He looked closer at his father. ‘You don’t look long for this world, either. Guess I’ll be seeing you soon, then,’ he added, trying his best to make light of the situation.

He abruptly turned to leave, but then looked back. ‘We can sort things out after, we’ll have the rest of time to do so.’ This time there was no flippancy in his tone. Seeing his dad looking so close to death hit Jake more than he would have expected. ‘Bye, Dad, see you soon.’

He walked to door and as he was about to pass through it he heard a sharp guttural sound from behind. Jake span around quickly. His dad was convulsing, clutching at the blankets. With a dawning sense of dread Jake realised that his dad was trying to clutch his heart.

The old man was having a heart attack.

Jake rushed over to the side of the bed. ‘I didn’t mean it! You’re a fighter, come on!’ He ran out of the room, and once in the hallway he shouted out. ‘Somebody come! He’s having a heart attack. He’s… ‘ Jake stopped and looked back at the door to his dad’s room. ‘He’s dying,’ he finished limply, and, giving in to the exhaustion, he collapsed onto the floor.

It was almost fifteen minutes before he felt strong enough to go back into the room. Jake swallowed and waited for his dad’s ghost

to sit up, but nothing happened. His dad's dead body remained inactive, forgotten about. Jake shook his head. 'I really am alone,' he said.

Jake Morgan stopped by the police box, which now stood outside his house. He tried to place his palm on the box, but, as he expected, it passed right through.

'See me yet?' Jake asked, hoping the Doctor could hear him. 'If you can, then I just need to sort out one more thing.' He turned to his house and walked up to the door.

Jake Morgan found Fay in their bed, but she was not sleeping. She lay there on her side, one arm wrapped around herself, the other holding a tissue up to her nose to prevent it from running, while she tried to hold back her tears.

He looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was almost one thirty in the morning. He had left to see Robert almost eight hours earlier, and as far as Fay was concerned he had not come back since.

He walked across the room and knelt beside the bed. 'I'm so very sorry; I would give anything to hold you, but... ' He reached out to touch her hair, and let his hand hover less than an inch above her head. 'We would've been so good together, just you and me against the world.' He smiled sadly. 'I love you, more than anything in my whole life, but I've got to go now. Be strong. I'll never forget you.'

Jake stood up and walked to the bedroom door. He stopped there for a moment, eyes closed tightly, his lower lip quivering with emotion. Deep within he felt so hollow, as if his soul had been ripped out. He looked back at Fay, and whispered; 'I love you. Goodbye, babe.'

Jake Morgan stepped through the front door. He had come to think of the police box as his carriage into the next life, wherever it was that ghosts went. The man who was called 'Doctor' was his guide, waiting for Jake to let go of the mortal realm first. Saying goodbye to this life had been the hardest thing he had ever done, and staying around longer would have torn him apart. It was time to go.

He stopped, looking at where the police box had stood. The pavement was empty.

‘No,’ he said softly, and quickly walked over to the spot where the box had been. He looked around, down the street, from one end to the other. All of a sudden it seemed like the street was never ending.

‘I was ready’ he said.

Jake Morgan was his name, but it had been over two weeks since anyone had addressed him. As a ghost destined to roam Hammersmith forever he wondered why he would need a name. No one ever spoke to him. They did not even know he was here.

For the first few days he had kept himself busy by accompanying either Fay or Robert to work, but that had soon bored him. There was only so much he could say without a reaction, and listening to Fay on the phone all day, or watching Robert unpack boxes of books, soon became more than a little tedious.

From time to time he would return to the nursing home, hoping that his father might turn up. Despite how he had let his dad down in life, in death he hoped they would be able to make up for wasted time. His father never did appear.

Soon it all became pointless. All the fun things he had thought about held no interest for him now; there was little joy to be had when you could not touch anything.

In the end he spent all his time at his house, doing his best to stay close to Fay. He had had to sit there and watch her mourn him. For a few days she tried to be hopeful, going to work and carrying on with her life, but as the days passed he could tell her hope was starting to break. Robert came over often to check up on her, as did her parents and brother, but Jake was the only one still around to know that Fay put on an act when they were there.

No one had visited for a couple of days, and Fay decided to book

time off work. Jake was glad in a way, because that meant more time alone with her.

That had not worked out as he had planned.

Instead she had used that time to visit some friends living in Scotland, unknowingly leaving Jake all alone.

Three days with no one for company left a lot of time for thinking, but two weeks being a ghost with no one to talk to had given him enough time to think of everything he needed to think about. For those three days he resolved to sit in the corner of the living room doing nothing at all.

He was still sitting there, in complete silence, when he heard a familiar sound. It was a sound he had given up hope of hearing. It was that strange wheezing sound. He slowly rose to his feet and walked over to the window. Outside, gradually coming into being, was the police box.

He ran outside quicker than he had ever moved before.

Moments after the police box had become solid the narrow door opened and a man Jake did not know stepped outside. He jumped when he noticed Jake, and poked his head back through the door.

‘Doctor, he’s here!’

‘Excellent,’ came the old voice from inside the box.

The young man was not much taller than Jake, with a lot of dark hair and dressed like he had just come out of the seventies. This must have been Jeremy.

‘I knew you could see me,’ Jake said with a lot more emotion than he would have expected.

Jeremy nodded. ‘Oh yah, the Doctor’s a wiz at creating these sorts of gadgets,’ he said, pointing to a small silver device attached to his left ear The apparatus seemed to go inside the ear, while a small

protrusion pointed out parallel to the man's eye. 'Helps me see you. He's jolly clever.'

'Yes, thank you, Jeremy,' the Doctor said, as he stepped out of the police box. 'Maybe you should go and wait inside the TARDIS?'

Jeremy looked crestfallen, but nonetheless did as he was told and entered the police box. Once Jeremy was inside, the Doctor turned to look at Jake. He, too, was wearing one of the silver devices.

'I'm terribly sorry, old chap,' the Doctor said.

Jake had so much to ask, but for now he pointed at the silver device. 'Is that a ghost spotter?'

The Doctor fingered the device. 'Good grief no, it just enables the wearer to see into the reality bubble. He frowned, and scratched his nose, and Jake almost smiled at the amount of movement the Doctor managed to put into one simple expression. 'Oh dear, you haven't spent the past two weeks thinking you were dead, have you?'

Jake nodded. 'Well, I am. That beam of light killed me.'

'Oh no, that just created a dimensional bubble around you. My dear chap, you're not dead. No one can see you, and you can't make contact with anything, but you're not dead. I'm not a killer you know, well,' and at this the Doctor rubbed his upper lip, 'never intentionally.'

Jake was trying his best to take it all in. 'If you knew this, you got a reason why you've waited two weeks to tell me? Got any idea what I've been going through?'

'I can only imagine. I've been trying to find a way to, ah, burst the bubble, so to speak. You see that light that "attacked" you was temporal energy, released by Jeremy's attempts at being helpful. It created a bubble of reality around you, a reality different from the one you should be in. Fortunately, though, your quantum signature is strong enough to act as an anchor, holding you in this reality.

Unfortunately I can't seem to burst the bubble, so you're stuck as you are.' There was a deep sadness in the Doctor's eyes, and Jake knew then that what the Doctor said was true.

'I suppose to all intents and purposes as long as you're anchored to this reality you *are* dead.

Jake's hopes vanished, blinked out by the Doctor's words. He looked to the ground and slowly shook his head.

'I can take you somewhere in the TARDIS,' the Doctor said hopefully, and indicated the police box, 'where you can live with people who will be able to see you. It's another reality, the same as the bubble that you're in. It will mean a new life, but at least you will have company and not be alone. I've already arranged it with... erm... with a friend. I'll take you to him and he will take you the rest of the way.'

'But... ' Jake began and looked over at his house. 'You reckon anyone wearing that ear device can see me?'

'Well, of course, I designed it,' the Doctor said, with just a hint of smugness.

'What about her?' Jake pointed at Fay, who was just getting out of her car. The Doctor looked over, then back at Jake, his features uncertain. 'She's my fiancee, and I have to say goodbye to her. She thinks I'm dead.'

'It might be better if you left it like that.'

'What?' Jake walked past the Doctor and pointed at Fay. 'Better? I love her. She's spent two weeks destroyed because she thinks I'm dead. If she knew the truth maybe it would help her heal' He looked over at his fiancee as she started walking towards the house. 'Do you have any idea what it's like to be in love?' he asked the Doctor. 'To feel so incredibly happy just because someone smiles at you?'When Jake turned back to the Doctor he found the old man smiling

‘Yes, I do remember such a time,’ the Doctor said with fondness at his private memory.

Jake Morgan’s heart felt lighter than it had in two weeks. Fay was sitting on the porch of their house, still looking up at Jake with disbelief.

It had taken the Doctor mere moments to convince Fay to put the silver device in her ear, and when she had she had almost fallen over with the shock of seeing Jake before her. He had made a move to steady her, and realised painfully that he still could not hold her. Instead he had to settle on simply talking.

He explained everything as best as he could, and the more he spoke the more he could see that Fay was beginning to understand. He knew it would take her a while to fully get to grips with everything, but at least this final talk would give her closure. It was all that Jake had left to give her.

‘It’s time we both moved on,’ he said finally.

Fay took a juddering breath. ‘But I don’t want to move on. I can see you with this thing,’ she said and pointed to the device sticking out of her ear.

‘I can wear it all the time, then we can still be together. You can be... ‘

Jake shook his head sadly. ‘It’d never work. Both of us being around each other; you being the only person who can see me’

‘I could let others borrow this. Like Robert, he’d love to see you again.’

Jake chewed his lip, feeling terrible because he had to crush all of Fay’s hopes. ‘It would just hurt you more, and me. Never being able to hold each other again. You deserve to be happy, not left hanging on for something that’s never gonna happen. We can’t live like that. You need to find someone you can be with. For real.’

‘I’ll never love them the same.’

Jake inhaled deeply. ‘Promise me you’ll find someone to make you happy.’

Fay attempted a smile. I’ll try.’

‘That’s all we can do,’ Jake said. ‘Listen, Robert is still around.

He’s so much like me sometimes, at least being around him will feel like a part of me is still here.’

At that Fay really did smile. ‘Yeah, and he’s nuts, too.’

Jake laughed softly. ‘Maybe he will get you that silk dress?’

Fay stood up. ‘Jake,’ she said, not even trying to hold back her tears. Jake just nodded at her, doing what he could to hold back his own feelings. The moment was made all the more precious for him since it was the first time someone had called him by his name in two weeks. After several moments of silence Fay managed to mouth the word ‘bye’ Jake smiled and walked away.

Once he reached the TARDIS he glanced back. ‘I love you,’ he said to Fay’s back as she entered the house.

Jake Morgan took one last look at his former home, then turned and stepped into the time machine. He closed the door firmly on his previous life.

Charley looked from the Professor to Jake and then to the Baspral Inquisitor. ‘Is the Doctor who you met the same one that the Professor and Jake encountered, or is there yet another version of the Doctor?’

The Inquisitor shrugged. ‘My memory of the Doctor doesn’t match theirs, no. But in many ways, they are similar. See if you agree.’

And so he began his tale...

Short Trips: Monsters

One thing I was very keen on with the Short Trips range was that new writers should be given their chance and that the books should introduce fresh names to the world of Doctor Who fiction. In 2008, the range included an entire collection of stories from a first-time-writer competition, and from the outset the series encouraged unpublished writers.

On 6 February 2004, Matt Grady pitched an on-spec idea, which was for a First Doctor story called The Secret *of Fire.* I wrote back on 25 February, saying how much I liked it. We busked a few ideas back and forth over email and Matt came up with a new synopsis. The story was shifted from its original 1965 setting, the First Doctor was replaced with the Fifth, Matt came up with a new tide, and the story was commissioned. What I really liked about the idea was how he was inventive with the theme. Monsters was all about different types of monstrous threats, not simply the slobbering-beast kind, and Matt's story was an intriguing twist on just what can constitute a 'monster'.

Flashpoint is topped and tailed by newspaper extracts, a nice shorthand used to tip off the reader what the mystery is going to be. If this were an episode of The X Files, I suppose *the* pre-titles sequence would see Dr Orlando Dirossi discovering the leak in the marble bust. In fact, The X Files is a good touchstone for this story. It features the same kind of mystery, which reveals itself by spooky, unnerving happenings, and turns out to be explicable only in science- fiction terms. But who are our Mulder and Scully?

As well as the Fifth Doctor, the story features a companion from a previous era of the show's history. Dr Elizabeth Shaw appeared in four television serials in 1970 and is a great choice for this story. Her appearance in Rome in 1999 is logical and Matt uses her occasional haughtiness so well, giving her a prickly relationship with the Doctor. Visiting old assistants after they'd left the series, and pairing them up with other Doctors, has been done many times in various forms of Doctor Who. As well as being a pleasing piece of

continuity for those who like such things, it gives a great opportunity for the writer to play with new combinations. Matt decided to add to the fun by having Liz, our point-of- view character, not realise who this mysterious man is...

In a short-story collection, you need a good mixture of formats and story types. Alongside big, epic adventures and small-scale character studies there can be self-contained mysteries and more unconventional experiments. Flashpoint is a charming, well-told mystery with a fascinating twist on the 'monsters' theme, brought to life by Matt Grady. And, on a personal note, Flashpoint is also one of my favourite stories because it contains the first appearance, albeit off-stage, of Colonel Emily Chaudhry. In his final draft, Matt had included a couple of references to Brigadier Bambera, the latter-day leader of UNIT from the TV series. Around the time I was editing Monsters, I was also producing Big Finish's UNIT audio dramas. We were in pre-production at that time, and the writers and I were devising the characters. So Bambera got replaced to provide a nice little bit of foreshadowing before Emily's first audio appearance later in 2004.

Ian Farrington

Flashpoint
Matt Grady

Archaeologists have discovered the wreckage site of an ancient Roman slave-trader ship off the northern coast of Sicily. Surveying has uncovered pottery shards, coins, iron shackles and one very special find.

'It's a well-preserved marble bust of Emperor Nero,' reports Dr Orlando Dirossi, who is heading the recovery. Nero ruled the Roman Empire from 54 to 68 AD, and there is speculation that he masterminded the Great Fire of 64 AD, which covered nearly two-thirds ofRome.

The bust, thought to date from around the time of Nero's death, has puzzled archaelogists since its discovery due to an odd phenomenon.

'It leaks,' says Dr Dirossi. 'At first we thought sea water had collected inside. But after a week, it's still leaking condensation out of a crack in its base. Very peculiar - an inner heat source of some kind.' The Nero bust is currently on display at the Palermo Museum in Rome.

Giornale di Sicilia
15 March 1999

Tanned locals and sunburned tourists shuffled past red-figured vases, bronze statues and a sculptured sarcophagus, into a large showroom. A crowd of visitors inched forward and stood on tiptoe, muttering to each other as they struggled to catch a glimpse of the display. A young guard stood in the corner, observing members of the crowd.

A little boy slipped loose from his mother's grasp and edged past the towering adults to the clearing ahead. Reaching the roped-off section at the front of the room, the boy saw a marble head on top of a clear column. Drops of water passed through a screen and fell

into a shallow pool at the column's base. The head took no notice of the boy and continued staring blankly at the curious, fixated crowd.

The boy ducked under the rope and approached the head. With a grin, he looked up the nostrils of the aquiline nose, then tapped on the column. Chuckles and whispers rose from the front row. The boy reached up to the head and ran a finger over the marble surface. It felt cool in some spots and, oddly, warm in others. He placed his hand on the chin and suddenly jumped back. Wiping his hand on his shirt, the boy's face reddened and he began to cry.

The guard awoke from a reverie and pushed his way through the crowd. The boy's mother ducked under the ropes, grabbed the crying child and dragged him out of the room.

The commotion subsided as the crowd's attention returned to Nero's unflinching gaze.

'Have you explored much of the city, *signora?'*

'Besides what I've seen out the car window? The Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Forum, the Spanish Steps... but just in passing.'

'Be sure to visit the countryside, if you can,' the driver said. The car pulled up to the pavement. 'Here we are, *signora.'*

Dr Elizabeth Shaw turned her attention away from the window.

'The countryside?'

He chuckled. 'No, the university.'

'Pity.' She exited the car and called over her shoulder, 'See you this evening.'

The driver waved as he sped away. Liz ascended the concrete steps of the University of Rome's Science building, silhouetted in the bright morning light. Passing through the entrance, she flashed her security pass to the male guard at the front desk.

‘Buon giorno.’

The guard nodded. *‘Buon giorno, dottoressa* Shaw.’

Liz proceeded down a whitewashed hallway, lined on either side with offices and laboratories. She returned nods from passing professors, on their way to classrooms. Turning a corner, she stopped at the first door on her left and fished out a set of keys from her handbag. The door opened onto an office with a metal desk surrounded by filing cabinets. Liz threw her jacket over the desk chair, stirring the pages of a university newsletter. Gathering back her hair, and trying not to think about the streaks of grey, she tied it up into a bun.

Except for greetings in Italian and better coffee, her morning routine here differed little from that at Cambridge. But at least there, the long hours she spent at the research lab were productive. Here in Rome, she was making little progress. She frowned, realising the chances of turning this assignment into a paid vacation were slim.

Her lab coat hung on the adjacent wall, beside the door to the lab.

Liz tensed, noticing the dim light through the door’s translucent window. She crossed the room and checked the door handle: unlocked. Had the caretaker - Claudio, that was his name, wasn’t it? - forgotten to lock up? From her brief conversation with the man, she’d gathered he’d been with the university for some time. He wouldn’t be so careless, she thought.

She hesitated a moment before turning the handle and opening the door a crack. She peered through the dim lamplight and spotted a man sitting at the lab table, his back facing her. Liz considered alerting security. Surely the stranger had heard her come into the office? Or maybe he was too absorbed in his work. If so, he was a rather bold spy, or a rather foolish one.

‘There’s no need to call security,’ the stranger said. The voice was friendly, disarming.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ Liz said in her best authoritative voice. ‘This lab is off-limits to the public.’

‘And for good reason.’

‘Then I’d appreciate it if you left at once.’

The stranger retrieved a leather wallet from his coat pocket and held it up to her, his attention still focused on the table.

Cautiously, Liz entered the lab, grabbed the wallet and stepped back. She flipped it open to reveal a familiar identity card: ‘United Nations Intelligence Taskforce: scientific adviser.’ The photo showed a youthful, fair-haired man grinning for the camera. She read the name: ‘Dr Jonas Smythe.’

‘Yes, how do you do. The security guard was kind enough to let me in.’

‘You should have waited at the front desk with him.’ Liz relaxed a little and placed the wallet on the table. ‘Why are you here? I was under the impression UNIT had selected me as science advisor for this assignment.’

The man swivelled around on the stool to face her, a pair of half-moon glasses perched on his nose. He flashed her a grin. ‘I’m your assistant. Colonel Chaudhry thought you’d be happier if you weren’t stuck with all the work.’

‘How kind of her,’ Liz said, straight-faced. ‘Unfortunately, I’ve reached an impasse and haven’t made any progress all week. Unless you have a wealth of radical ideas, I’m afraid you were sent here for nothing.’ She studied Smythe for a moment. Over a cricket sweater and striped trousers, he wore a beige lab coat with a sprig of celery pinned to one lapel. ‘Where were you seconded from, Dr Smythe?’

He snatched his glasses away from his face. ‘Nowhere in particular. I travel around.’

She moved to the side of the table, on which was a marble bust on a

perforated metal plate, resting on a shallow pan. Chiselled locks of hair surrounded a round, corpulent face: puffy cheeks, double chin, wide nose and small mouth. Water droplets formed at a crack in its base and fell into the pan.

‘Did anyone brief you on our friend here?’ Liz retrieved a file from a drawer in the table.

‘A bust of Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, found at the site of a shipwreck, well-preserved save for a small crack. It houses an unexplained source of heat, which is causing condensation to form inside. Hence its leaky nature.’

‘So, yes, then?’ said Liz.

Smythe stood up and paced the room. ‘What tests have been performed on the bust so far?’

Liz opened the file. ‘Let’s see... CAT scan, ultrasound, thermal imaging, Geiger counter - all inconclusive. Readings wavered, images came out blurred.’

Smythe glanced over Liz’s shoulder at the contents of the folder. ‘How about a fibre optic camera, as used in surgery?’

‘It’s been tried. The camera shorted out - twice.’

‘Did it really? How interesting.’ He bent over the table and peered into the marble eyes, then traced the eyelids with his finger.

‘Smythe, you may - ‘

His face winced and he withdrew his finger.

‘- want to use gloves if you’re going to touch it.’ She nodded to a pair of workman’s gloves on the table.

‘Curious. I suddenly felt disoriented, as if I stood up too fast. Did you experience a similar sensation, Liz?’

She cleared her throat. ‘Pardon me, Dr Smythe, but I wasn’t aware we were on a first-name basis.’

Smythe rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Sorry. Dr Shaw, I should say.’

‘In my initial briefing from UNIT, I was advised to use gloves when handling the sculpture. One of its strange traits: prolonged, direct contact results in dizziness and fatigue.’ She flipped to a report in the folder. ‘Apparently, one of the Palermo Museum staff fainted while transporting the bust. When co-workers woke him and removed the bust from his grip, they noted burn marks on his palms.’

Smythe slipped his hands into his trouser pockets. ‘No wonder the scientific community is showing such an interest.’

‘And archaeologists are fighting them in the courts to prevent the bust from being cut open,’ Liz added.

Smythe glared at Nero. ‘Cutting him open would do far more harm than good.’ He turned to Liz. ‘Were any photos taken of that museum worker’s hands?’

She flipped through the folder and handed him a colour photograph. The image showed a close-up of the man’s right palm. The skin was red and swollen. Smythe reviewed the attached medical report.

‘According to this physician, the burns originated beneath the skin. The first-degree burns on the skin hid far worse tissue damage underneath.’

Liz took a look at the photo. ‘More like an extreme allergic reaction or Infection.’

‘It’s as if the warmth in his hands rose to searing levels.’ He handed her the image.

‘Like an isolated fever? I’ve never heard of such a case.’

Smythe sat down and wiped his brow. The air conditioning seems to be malfunctioning. I adjusted it when I entered the lab, but it's still warm in here.'

Liz walked over to the thermostat and turned the dial a full revolution. 'It's like this every morning. You have to turn it to full to have any effect. I checked with the professors in the offices around the corner, and they rarely need to have it on as high as I do.'

'Have you noted anything else peculiar?'

'Yes.' She returned to the table and slid back the metal plate on which the marble bust rested. Running her fingers through the water in the pan, she grabbed something and placed it in Smythe's hand.

'A dead fly?' He examined the shrivelled insect in the lamplight. 'Ah, a cooked dead fly.'

'I usually find a couple of them a week - the occasional spider, too.'

'Or a museum worker had he been found an hour later.'

Liz sighed. 'Yet they insist on putting such a dangerous object on display. The investors of the archaeological survey are keen to recoup every penny and then some.'

'It's put on display here at the university?'

'Yes, in the afternoon from twelve to five, at the gallery. Analyses and research are conducted in the mornings and evenings. The rest of the day, I try to be a tourist.'

Smythe grinned thoughtfully. 'Seems ages since my last visit to Italy... Electroencephalograph.'

'What?'

He sprang from his seat and turned his bright eyes on Liz, causing

her to take a step back. ‘Does the university have an electroencephalograph - EEG equipment?’

‘A brain-wave monitor?’ Just what did he have in mind? ‘I’m sure I could secure one from the Medical Studies building. Though not till this evening, or perhaps tomorrow.’

‘This can’t wait. Let’s see if we can pull some strings.’ He hurried out of the room, stirring loose pages in his wake.

What an odd man, Liz thought. Where on Earth did UNIT find him? He seemed bright enough though, asking many pertinent questions. His keenness and spirit reminded her of her younger self, eager to change the world after completing her first Ph.D. She locked up the lab, put on her lab coat and followed after him.

Claudio Terrizzi finished his sandwich and checked his watch: 11:46 a.m. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and tucked it back into his coveralls pocket. Checking his cleaning cart, he grabbed a few supplies off the metal shelves lining the narrow caretaker’s room. Satisfied, he hit the light switch and pushed the cart into the hallway.

He hummed a tune as he passed office after office. Apparently, the professors preferred the clicking of keyboards or the buzzing of lab equipment to his whistled symphonies. Their loss.

Making his way through the building, he stopped the cart before *dottoressa* Shaw’s office. His wizened hands retrieved a ring of keys from his pocket and he flipped to the right one. *La dottoressa* seemed kind enough, pretty too, Claudio thought. He’d only spoken to the British scientist briefly, and her mind was somewhere else. Probably on her research.

The caretaker entered the office and unlocked the lab. Chill air washed over him as he opened the door. ‘Every single day!’ he muttered. You’d think someone from England would enjoy the warmth here, Claudio thought. But each day at noon, he discovered the air conditioning in *la dottoressa’s* lab set to full. Homesickness, indeed.

From beneath the desk lamp, Nero stared at him blankly. Claudio smiled. He put on his gloves and approached the marble bust. What a magnificent sculpture! While the public paid 8000 lira to see it in the gallery, he had the fortune of studying it daily as a perk of the job. Checking in the pan, he shook his head as he removed the dead insects. Couldn't she swat flies and throw them in the bin like everyone else? He'd have to have a polite word with her...

He gripped the sides of the pan and lifted the bust onto his cart. Locking up, Claudio headed to the elevator and descended to the first floor. He made for the back entrance and placed a plastic container over Nero before exiting. The concrete walkways of the courtyard glowed white in the midday sun. Students gave Claudio passing nods or greetings on their way to classes. As usual, everyone dismissed the overturned container.

If it were up to him, Claudio thought, he'd put the marble bust on display in the middle of the courtyard for all the students and faculty to see. On a column in the middle of a flower garden, yes, that would be ideal. And he wouldn't even have to water the flowers: Nero had that covered. The caretaker grinned.

But here at the university, the bust was nothing but a tool used by the investors to milk the public. Crowds of people raved and gushed over the sculpture as if it were one of those weeping portraits of Christ or statuettes of the Virgin Mary that appeared in the tabloids. And it was the attraction of such a crowd that caused museum curators around Rome to turn up their noses. But, for a percentage of the profits, the university was more than willing to showcase the dripping Nero in their tiny gallery.

Claudio pushed the cart to a building across campus, and eventually stopped at the back door of the gallery.

'Ready to face the crowds?' he said, removing the plastic container. He knocked on the door. A moment later, a small, balding man wearing spectacles peeped his head out the door. Claudio picked up the pan and held it before the curator. The man took it, but Claudio's grip remained firm.

‘Grazie, Claudio,’ the curator said with a nervous smile.

The caretaker hesitated a moment before letting go. The door slammed shut in his face. With a sigh, he turned his cart around and headed back, his footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Back in the caretaker’s room, Claudio retrieved a sketchbook from his rucksack and sat in a wooden chair. He opened it at a page bookmarked by a Polaroid and removed a pencil from his breast pocket.

Liz left the Medical Studies building and took a sip of coffee from a paper cup. She held the door open as Smythe followed, cradling the EEG equipment.

‘Are you sure you don’t want help carrying that?’

Smythe adjusted his grip. ‘Yes, I’m sure, thanks.’

‘Coffee?’

‘No thanks, I prefer tea. Mind if we take a detour to the gallery?’

‘To see the Nero bust on display?’

‘Yes, I’m curious to see what sort of crowd it draws. Besides, we have a few hours to spare.’

Liz took another sip of coffee. ‘Follow me, then.’

She put on sunglasses and led her companion around the campus, weaving between groups of students. The sun glinted off car windscreens in the traffic surrounding the university. Liz kept a medium pace, grinning at Smythe’s efforts to keep the decades-old equipment balanced in his arms.

They soon came across a line of people filing through the open doors of the Fine Arts building. Small children shuffled their feet and tugged their mothers’ arms impatiently.

Liz and Smythe entered the building, where the line of people halted at the front desk. Liz spoke to a guard, who let them pass through a side door. Smythe set down the EEG equipment behind the desk. They entered a large, brightly lit room, its walls adorned with framed paintings, and sculptures on stands in the middle.

‘Artwork by students and local artists. With only this room and the showroom, the curator regularly brings in new pieces,’ Liz said.

‘Short attention span, I suppose?’ Smythe said, examining the collection.

People shuffled past them, paying little attention to their surroundings, and disappeared under an archway at the front of the room. Liz and Smythe followed. Inside, the curator greeted her, spotlights glaring off his head. A small crowd encircled a tall glass cylinder with the marble bust of Nero perched on top. Drops of water passed through the perforated top and fell into a bucket at the base. Its rhythmic drip reverberated through the showroom thanks to a microphone.

More people entered, pushing Liz and Smythe in an effort to get a closer look. Smythe put his hands in his pockets.

‘What’s your theory, Dr Shaw?’ Smythe whispered.

Liz stirred from her thoughts. ‘Pardon?’

‘Your theory about what’s inside the bust, causing people to pass out and suffer burns?’

‘I believe it’s an unknown radioactive element, with radiation that affects organic matter after prolonged direct contact,’ Liz whispered.

Smythe nodded. ‘That would explain the negative read-out of the Geiger counter.’

‘Then why the EEG equipment? Are you suggesting there’s

something living inside the marble?'

A few people pricked up their ears. The curator shushed Liz.

'You want to be thorough with your testing, don't you?' Smythe whispered.

'I suppose so,' she whispered back. She'd exhausted all the obvious testing methods, so why not try a few outlandish ones.

Otherwise, it would be another long day of reviewing research notes.

A man bumped into Smythe and forced his way to the front of the crowd. His hair was dishevelled, his white t-shirt wrinkled and spotted. His hands kneaded a sweater tied at his waist. He scanned the room and, as his eyes met hers, Liz glanced at her feet. She felt Smythe tense beside her.

'Did you hear that?' he whispered.

'Hear what?'

'That voice... Asking for warmth... '

They were both distracted by the t-shirt man as he began to circle the display, chuckling to himself. Liz spotted a guard stepping towards the crowd from the back entrance. The t-shirt man untied his sweater and rubbed it over his head like a towel while muttering a stream of words under his breath. Suddenly, he leaped forward and bundled up the sculpture in his sweater. The guard pushed through the crowd and tried to tackle him but, wielding his bundle like a ball and chain, the thief knocked the wind out of the guard with a sickening thud. Screams rose from the crowd as the guard crumpled to the floor.

Smythe tried to cut him off at the back entrance, but the thief charged into him. Liz checked on the fallen guard as he struggled to breathe. The guard from the front desk dashed into the room, spotted Smythe wrestling with the thief, and pushed through the

crowd. The thief shouldered Smythe into the wall and ran off down a hallway. Shaking the stars from his head, Smythe ran after him.

The curator pointed out the missing showpiece to the bemused front-desk guard, who then fumbled for his radio and barked orders over the commotion of the crowd. Liz followed the guard out the back entrance, down the hallway and through the exit. Other security guards appeared around the corners of surrounding buildings and rushed to join them.

'Damn heels,' Liz muttered, wincing. She slipped off her shoes and ran after the guards. She spotted Smythe thirty yards ahead on the main campus walkway.

The thief turned right and the guards followed suit, disappearing between buildings. Liz soon found herself in the large courtyard, with the Science building at the opposite corner. The thief darted across the walkway, the Doctor on his tail. A cart suddenly rolled into their path, pushed by Claudio, who'd been attracted by all the noise, no doubt. Liz found herself watching a rugby match, as the thief collided with the cart, toppling it over; and Smythe, unable to stop, tripped over both and tumbled into the grass.

Liz ran to Smythe's side as the guards surrounded the thief. The area was strewn with toilet paper and bottles of cleaning fluid. The thief jumped up holding the sweater bundle over his head. The guards stopped In their tracks.

Smythe sat up with a groan.

Claudio joined them. 'He'll smash the sculpture!' He pulled at his thinning hair. The crazy fool!'

The thief's eyes shifted erratically in their sockets as he recovered his breath. He muttered several quick sentences, catching Smythe's attention. Liz helped Smythe to his feet. 'What did he say?'

'He claims Nero speaks to him. That he asks for fire.'

Which Nero? Liz thought. The emperor - or the bust?!

‘Take it from him before he smashes it!’ Claudio told the guards. The thief unwrapped the bust and tossed aside the sweater. His hands gripped the marble surface tightly.

‘He’ll pass out,’ Liz told Smythe, who gazed at the marble bust intently.

Fire… inner fire!

The thought suddenly popped into Liz’s head. Or was that a voice? It was almost a whisper. She looked at Smythe, who noted her confused expression.

‘So you heard it too, then.’

Before she could comment, the thief’s trembling hands caught Liz’s attention. His eyes flickered and his head nodded forward. ‘Catch him! He’s fainting!’

The guards rushed forward as the man collapsed. The bust slipped from his grasp and hit the concrete face first, its nose shattering.

Claudio gasped.

The guards laid the unconscious thief down on his side. Chips of marble surrounded the bust. Wearing gloves, Claudio carefully turned it over.

‘Caspita!’

Nero’s new pockmarked complexion, with a flat, coarse patch in place of the nose, greeted him. Condensation trickled from the broken base. Claudio swept the chips of marble into a dustpan.

‘Such a waste…’ he muttered.

Smythe checked the thief s pulse then his hands, which appeared swollen. ‘Probably just minor tissue damage,’ he told Liz. ‘He’ll need a psychiatrist though.’

An emergency crew soon arrived with a stretcher, the curator in tow. He carried the EEG equipment. At the sight of the damaged sculpture, his eyes widened in shock.

‘This is horrible!’

Claudio glared at him. ‘See what happens when you display art as if it were a circus sideshow!’

‘He was a madman! We tried to stop -’

‘What’s done is done,’ Liz cut in. ‘The exhibit is closed till we’ve assessed the damage.’

‘How long will you need? A day or two?’ The curator smiled nervously.

‘Closed indefinitely.’

‘The investors won’t like this.’

Claudio’s eyes bore into the curator’s as he took the EEG equipment and placed it on his righted cleaning cart. He set the bust carefully beside it.

‘The damage isn’t too extensive,’ the curator pleaded. ‘At least let me keep it on display for the rest of the day. Those people have paid money after all.’

‘Good day, *signore,’* Smythe replied. The curator opened his mouth to object but, with a nod from Smythe, he returned to the gallery with his tail between his legs.

Claudio unloaded the EEG equipment, marble bust and broken pieces onto the lab desk.

‘Grazie, Claudio. We can handle things from here.’

‘Will you be able to repair the bust? I took a picture of it a few days

ago. That might help you.'

Liz smiled at him. 'No thank you, I have several pictures. And don't worry, it's in good hands. Now if you'll excuse us...'

'Of course.' Claudio smiled back and paid Nero one last glance before pushing the cart back into the hallway.

Smythe began setting up the EEG equipment.

'So you're convinced there's something sentient inside there?' She put on the workman's gloves and slipped a towel underneath the marble bust.

'I wouldn't rule out the possibility.'

He knows something, Liz thought. Some detail UNIT briefed him on but not me. Or maybe a fact known only to him... She considered how easy It would be to fake a UNIT pass. 'Jonas Smythe' did sound rather suspect.

'Would you mind attaching the electrodes, Dr Shaw?' He retrieved a multi-bit screwdriver from his coat pocket and unscrewed the cover of the equipment. Lifting it off, he prodded at the exposed circuitry.

Liz attached seven electrodes around the bust's head and stuffed one inside its base. 'Let's say there is something living inside here,' she said, recalling the whispered voice. 'The readings will be of little use when it's covered by a layer ofmarble.'

'That's why I'm adjusting the equipment sensitivity.'

Watching him work, Liz pictured another scientist from her days at UNIT. A much older man, of course. Always tinkering with gadgets, attempting to reverse the polarity of the neutron flow. Smythe replaced the cover and flashed her a grin. 'There. Now a brain the size of a fly will cause the readings to go off the chart.' He plugged in the power cord and flipped a switch. The equipment beeped, then whirred to life. Paper passed through the printer with a hum. The eight pens remained still, tracing a straight line.

Liz turned her attention from the read-out to Smythe.

‘It’s warming up,’ he said, fiddling with the amplifier and filter settings. ‘Maybe I should adjust the electrodes?’ Liz pulled one off the forehead. One of the pens twitched.

She quickly replaced the electrode. ‘Sorry, my fault.’

‘Perhaps... May I borrow one of your gloves?’

Liz removed her right glove and handed it to him. He slipped it on and approached the bust. Keeping his eyes on the EEG read- outs, he waved his gloved hand before Nero’s eyes. Then he placed his palm on the forehead.

Several pens twitched.

‘Interesting.’ Smythe pulled off the glove and pressed his bare fingers against the forehead.

All eight pens twitched wildly.

He snatched his hand away, and the pens continued dancing on the graph paper for a moment before resuming a straight line.

‘You were right!’ Liz exclaimed. ‘And it obviously thrives on body heat.’

‘Heat in general, which would explain the warm room each morning. But it can manipulate body heat far faster.’

Liz stood back from the table. ‘This certainly justifies UNIT’s interest. I suppose we should contact Colonel Chaudhry right away? She’s probably itching to create a cover-up.’

‘We’ll contact her later. First, we need to know what exactly we’re dealing with.’

‘How the hell did a creature get in there?’ Her mind raced over her

knowledge of geology. ‘Either it can manipulate the structure of rock and hide in it like a hermit crab. Or it was caught in a lava stream that cooled into igneous rock, then metamorphosed into marble.’

‘I doubt it would have remained encased in marble for two thousand years on the Mediterranean seabed if it were capable of escaping. So it was probably caught in lava.’

‘But from lava to marble, millions of years would have passed.

Unless there are other such creatures beneath the Earth’s crust, it’s certainly not from this planet,’ Liz said.

Smythe nodded. ‘Precisely. It probably penetrated through the Earth’s crust as a meteorite.’

‘And a large volcano or seismic event cast it up to the surface, where it was caught in lava?’ Liz suggested.

‘That would be my guess. The lava probably drifted into an ancient sea, cooling before the creature could manipulate the heat.’

‘This creature remains dormant in cold environments then,’ she concluded. ‘That’s how it survived through space.’

‘Then we should move it to a sub-zero environment, to be on the safe side. What’s nearby… Antarctica, Europa, Pluto -’

Liz snickered. ‘I suppose you have a rocket at your disposal?’ Smythe blushed. ‘No, of course not.’

‘There are several freezers in the building. We could store it in one until we find a better solution,’ Liz suggested.

‘Yes, cold storage.’ Smythe’s eyes lit up. ‘Liquid nitrogen! Is there any around? We could immerse the marble bust in that.’ ‘Probably in the Chemistry building.’

‘All right, let’s hurry then.’ He rushed out of the lab.

She sighed, suddenly feeling her age. So much for the long day of fruitless research.

Cleaning the windows, Claudio noticed *dottoressa* Shaw and her assistant leaving the building and crossing the courtyard in a hurry. Weren't they supposed to be assessing the damage to the marble bust? He'd only left them a short while ago, he thought. Was that madman on the loose again?

He dropped the spray cleaner and paper towel on the cart and pushed it to *la dottoressa's* office. Once there, he listened closely for footsteps and checked around the corner. The hallway was empty. He quietly unlocked the door. Inside, he closed the door behind him and crossed the room to the lab. Light shone through the door's translucent window. Claudio put his ear to the door just in case and listened intently for a minute or two. A faint hum, that was all.

Maybe they had taken the marble bust somewhere - perhaps to be X-rayed? But he didn't recall either of the scientists carrying a bundle. He glanced back at the office door before unlocking the lab. Edging open the door, he peeked inside.

'What the hell?'

The bust was on the table where he'd left it, but the scientists had stuck electrodes all over the head. Wires trailed from it to the electronic equipment at the table's edge. Paper slid out of a printer and piled in a nest on the floor. Memories of his brother hooked up to similar equipment at the hospital flashed through Claudio's mind.

'Look at how they're treating you!' he told the bust. 'What kind of freak experiment is this?'

He unfastened the electrodes and, with gloved hands, tipped the bust to remove the wire tucked in its base. Water trickled onto the towel.

The read-out pens twitched.

Claudio stared into Nero's eyes. They don't appreciate you, not like I do, he thought. They think of you as a scientific curiosity. A curio requiring endless tests. He suddenly shivered, the room feeling colder than usual. He turned off the air conditioning and knelt down to turn on the baseboard heater. About time this room felt some heat.

Sitting on a stool, he ran his gloved fingers over the damaged face, tracing ridges and brittle edges. He eyed the miniature quarry of marble in the dustpan.

This will take weeks to repair, he thought, maybe months. How could he be sure if *dottoressa* Shaw and her assistant would even bother? Rather than put it back on display, they might store the marble bust away in some warehouse, with thousands of other artefacts and antiques.

You must keep me close.

'I wish I could, but they'll come looking for you. And there are only so many places I can hide you here.'

Then take me away. But keep me close.

Claudio thought it over. Where could he go? Hiding the bust in his flat was too obvious. Somewhere outside the city... His sister's place in Siciliy, that could work. Store it in her cellar with his other belongings. He could travel there at the weekends to repair it.

The caretaker looked around the room. He needed something to hide the sculpture in, in case he passed someone in the hallway. He walked into the office and noticed *dottoressa* Shaw's green jacket. It would have to do. He slipped it off the desk chair and returned to the lab. He retrieved a garbage bag from his pocket and emptied the contents of the dustpan inside. Bundling up Nero in the jacket, he cradled it against his chest and hurried to the office door.

Claudio halted at the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Nero's blank eyes met his through an opening in the jacket.

I am the spark that sets the flame.

He held a finger to his lips.

The footsteps neared the office, then turned a corner in the other direction, fading down the hallway.

'That was close,' he whispered, sighing with relief. He glanced back at the lab door, which remained unlocked. How clumsy! I can't leave behind too many clues, Claudio thought. He crossed the office and fumbled for the key with his gloved hand. His hand trembled as he tried to insert the key into the lock. Removing the glove, he tried again.

Suddenly the footsteps returned, quickly growing louder as they approached the office.

Claudio flung open the door and closed it behind him, being careful not to slam it. He turned the lock then crouched beneath the door window. He heard the office door creak open. The footsteps crossed the room and stopped.

'Dottoressa?' said a light female voice.

Sweat trickled down Claudio's brow.

The stranger knocked on the window. *'Dottoressa* Shaw? I have a phone message from someone at UNIT.'

The air rippled above the heater as the warmth of the lab became uncomfortable. Claudio's knees began to ache. As he adjusted to a sitting position, he felt the sculpture slip from the jacket. He caught it before it could hit the floor.

The footsteps crossed the office into the hallway and faded away once again.

Claudio took a long, deep breath. He tried to stand up, but his aching knees wouldn't support the weight. He relaxed his muscles, feeling very tired. The room began to spin, Nero's gleaming white

face its focal point.

I feel your inner fire. Sleep. Sleep now.

The room darkened as Claudio tried to stay awake, but his eyelids were made of lead. He clutched the marble bust against his chest with his bare hand. His head slumped forward, pressing into the chiselled hair.

Glorious warmth.

Claudio had read about out-of-body experiences, but seeing his slumped form at the base of the lab door - and realising it wasn't a reflection - was truly frightening.

Inner fire, coursing through the body. Glorious warmth.

The voice filled the room and hung in the air like smoke.

He sensed a presence reaching out from the marble bust to his body. He heard his pulse speed up as the presence drew forth on his body heat like a leech. The skin of his face and hands began to swell and redden. The presence intensified and burn blisters soon formed on the skin.

Claudio wanted to warn his body, but he had no voice, no corporeal form. He couldn't even look away.

The inner fire is invigorating.

He saw his body twitch and his face wince in pain, then suddenly relax. His hair began to singe and the skin blacken. Smoke rose from his coveralls as they smouldered.

The presence filled his body and the clothes burst into flame. The fire consumed his form and then, as if doused with petrol, became a roaring blaze. The nest of graph paper caught fire and flames spread to the table.

I shall consume all.

The presence intensified further, and the entire lab was soon blanketed with fire.

Liz brought up the rear as Smythe dragged a trolley down the hallway. She made sure its cargo, a round refrigeration unit filled with liquid nitrogen, remained as upright as possible. They both jumped as alarm bells rang through the Science building.

‘Fate is determined to keep me out of this building today,’ Liz said. ‘Think you can transport this liquid nitrogen back outside on your own?’ Smythe asked. ‘I’m going to check your lab.’

‘Worried about that creature?’

He backed down the hallway. ‘I’m worried about what it’s up to.’ ‘I’m coming with you then.’ She left the trolley behind and followed after him.’

‘Dr Shaw -’

‘Save your breath. I was the one given this assignment, after all.’ They passed professors and students hurrying to the exits, some carrying bundles of notes. Rounding a corner, Liz and Smythe began coughing as they ran headlong into thick smoke. Wiping the tears from her eyes, Liz made out flames at the end of the hallway. They covered their mouths with their coat lapels.

‘It’s my lab!’ she yelled over the alarm bells.

‘There’s nothing we can do: the blaze is too big.’

Liz pointed out the abandoned cleaning cart silhouetted in flames.

‘Where’s Claudio?’ She saw Smythe’s quizzical look. ‘The caretaker!’

‘Quick,’ he said. ‘Let’s check his room and then get that refrigeration unit out of the building!’

They doubled back and joined the crowd of people making for the

exits. They peeked in the cleaning supply room, but the caretaker wasn't there. Smythe picked up a sketch of Nero, with a Polaroid of the marble bust clipped to the page.

'Secret admirer.'

They returned to the trolley and dragged it out the nearest exit. Sirens wailed as fire engines arrived and screeched to a halt before the Science building. Liz and Smythe joined the crowd assembled in the courtyard. She noticed his eyes were distant.

'We don't have much time,' he whispered.

The fire chief, a burly man with a raspy voice, escorted Liz an d Smythe to the scene of the fire.

'What exactly is this critical experiment you need to check on?' the chief asked Liz. 'Is it a danger to my men?'

'If they approach it, yes,' Smythe cut in, dragging the trolley. 'And what's inside that container?'

'A way to suppress the danger,' Smythe replied.

They rounded the corner, passing a firefighter standing guard at the end of the hallway, a charged hose in hand. The office was blackened by smoke; the one dividing the lab had been reduced to a charred heap. Adjoining rooms were visible through gaping holes in the walls.

The fire chief stopped them from proceeding further. 'The contents of the lab are on the floor below. It's safer if we view them there.'

They descended the stairs and spotted another firefighter aiming a charged hose at an open office. Inside lay a pile of charred wood, flooring and concrete fragments lying within a circle of warped, dented filing cabinets. Liz noticed pieces of circuitry from the EEG equipment.

Come closer. Closer.

That voice again, Liz thought. She looked at Smythe.

‘It’s in there,’ he whispered. ‘And it’s become more powerful.’ ‘Most of this could have been prevented if they’d installed a sprinkler system. Tight budget, I guess,’ the fire chief said. ‘But I’m hard pressed to find a cause. No signs of an electrical fire or the use of an accelerant.’

‘Have you sorted through the rubble yet?’ Liz asked.

‘Just a quick sweep.’ The fire chief led them inside and crouched by the pile. He picked up something and held it up to them. A charred, broken jaw with a few teeth intact. ‘I’ve only found a couple of bone fragments. The rest were incinerated, it seems.’

Liz’s heart sank. ‘Claudio.’

Smythe’s expression was grim. ‘He must have entered the lab after we left.’

Come closer. I shall consume you all.

Images intruded into Liz’s mind: a fiery blaze, spreading through her lab, enveloping Claudio’s slumped form. She winced.

‘Do either of you know what could have caused this?’ the fire chief asked. ‘That blaze was intense enough to burn through a concrete floor! Yet the damage was relatively localised. I’ve never seen anything like it. It almost looks like spontaneous combustion.

Though you scientists will quickly dispel that theory.’

‘No, I think you’re right,’ Liz told him.

‘It caused all this by drawing upon the body heat of one man,’ Smythe whispered to her. ‘Just imagine what it could do using the heat at the heart of a volcano...’

‘Is it just me, or is there a radio on nearby?’ the fire chief asked,

standing between them. ‘I keep hearing this muffled voice… What’s going on?’

‘Our experiment’s buried somewhere in that pile,’ Liz said.

The fire chief passed a small shovel to Smythe. ‘Try not to disturb things too much.’

‘I’ll get the refrigeration unit ready,’ Liz said as Smythe carefully cleared small piles from the rubble. She unfastened the metal clasps around the lid.

Smythe took another stab at the rubble and the blade clanged. He remained still. ‘Your gloves please, chief. Your helmet, too. Quickly.’

The fire chief unfastened his red helmet and passed it to Smythe with his gloves. Smythe put them on and flipped down the visor.

‘Open the refrigeration unit, please.’

A cloud of vapour escaped the unit as Liz removed the lid, exposing bubbling liquid nitrogen.

Smythe carefully set down the shovel and swept away debris with his gloved hand. Blackened eyes peered up at him. Further clearing revealed a soot-stained, marble head with a web of cracks across its face. Liz feared the slightest touch would shatter it. She suddenly felt much warmer.

Inner fire, coursing through you. I can feel it.

‘What is that? A mask, a sculpture?’ the fire chief asked, approaching Smythe.

‘Stand back!’ Smythe gripped the shovel and gently lifted the bust, watching it carefully as if it were a mine that might explode with any sudden movement. ‘Stand back, all of you!’

The fire chief and Liz backed into the hallway. She noticed the hose

nozzle trembling in the hands of the young firefighter.

Smythe poised the shovel over the bubbling liquid. ‘If it breaks loose,’ he told the firefighter, ‘be ready to put me out.’

The young man exchanged a nervous glance with his chief.

With a flick of the shovel, the marble bust dropped into the liquid with a small splash. There was a muffled crunch, and Liz spotted something thrashing in the freezing liquid. Smythe dropped the shovel and slammed on the lid. Liz rushed over and helped him fasten the clamps. She winced as a scream pierced her mind. Smythe held the refrigeration unit still as the creature splashed about inside. After a few seconds, the movement slowed to the odd spasm, then stopped.

The fire chief gulped. ‘What the hell was that?’ he muttered.

Smythe passed him back his helmet and gloves. ‘An experiment that went wrong.’ He smiled at Liz. ‘But it appears we’ve contained the problem.’

Liz smiled back. Gripping the trolley handle, she dragged it towards the exit. Smythe followed.

‘Wait a moment!’ the fire chief called after them. ‘If you know what caused this, I require your testimony for my report!’

‘Sorry, but this matter is classified,’ Liz called over her shoulder. ‘If you have any questions or concerns, contact the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce.’

‘So what happens now?’ Liz asked, coming to a stop at the Science building front entrance. The late afternoon sun cast her and Smythe’s shadows into the traffic.

‘I need to get this creature to UNIT HQ.’

‘For further study?’

‘No, too dangerous. If it accidentally got loose or fell into the wrong hands…’

Liz remembered UNIT’s previous dealings with alien life. ‘You wouldn’t let them destroy it, would you?’

‘Of course not, it’s a sentient being after all.’ He patted the refrigeration unit. ‘As long as it remains in hibernation, it won’t bother anyone during the trip.’

A small car pulled up to the pavement. The driver, a young red-haired man, stepped out of the car and left the engine running. He and Smythe loaded the refrigeration unit into the boot before getting into the car.

Smythe poked his head out the window. ‘We’ll take it from here, Dr Shaw. Looks like your work here’s done. Enjoy the rest of your stay in Rome.’

Liz approached the passenger side of the car. ‘UNIT HQ is just a stopover, isn’t it? Where are you really taking the creature?’

Wise, disarming eyes looked into hers. ‘Return to sender.’

The car sped away into traffic. Liz shook her head in disbelief. He was right though: her work here was done. Her lab was destroyed, her research notes were reduced to ash, and the focus of her assignment was bobbing in liquid nitrogen.

Of course, UNIT would remain tight-lipped about the whole matter, she thought, and turn a deaf ear to her unanswered questions. And she would be left standing around with nothing to do, feeling frustrated. Typical. No wonder she’d left the organisation.

Another car pulled up. It was her driver. He stepped out of the car and looked at her anxiously.

‘Buono sera, signora. I came as soon as I heard about the fire. Are you all right?’

‘Yes, I’m fine... tired though. It’s been a long day.’

‘Why don’t I drive you to a nice cafe so you can relax.’

‘I’d appreciate that.’ Liz dragged the trolley to the front steps before getting into the car. Taking off her lab coat, something crinkled in the pocket. She reached in and pulled out a message scribbled on a piece of graph paper: ‘Thank you for your help, Liz. Good luck with your research at Cambridge. Tell Lethbridge- Stewart the Doctor said hello.’

The Doctor? What did he have to do with this? Liz lay back in her seat. She felt a headache coming on.

‘Mind if we take a drive through the countryside instead?’ she suggested.

A marble bust of Nero, thought to have been destroyed in a fire at the University of Rome last month, was returned today to the Palermo Museum.

Other than a broken nose, the sculpture is none the worse for wear. Recent X-rays have proven the bust to be hollow. According to top scientists, the mysterious inner heat source and leaking condensation were an elaborate hoax perpetrated by Dr Orlando Dirossi to appease his archaeological survey project investors.

Dirossi could not be reached for comment.

Giornale di Sicilia
24 May 1999

Short Trips: 2040

For my last Short Trips volume I elected to try something different: a book of stories that would all be set in the same year of Earth's future history, in which around half would be loosely linked with a background story arc. The premise was that aliens had made contact with Earth but in a gradual, pernicious way, adopting human form and gradually spreading their power and influence by way of a corporate empire. Huw's story very expertly picked up my premise and ran with it, putting the Perseus Corporation at the head of a project to develop military hardware with artificial intelligence. As well as being a strong story for the often ill-served Eighth Doctor, Thinking *Warrior* gives a poignant voice to the two intelligent tanks, Castor and Pollux, and despite its crisp, hard style, by the end packs quite an emotional punch.

John Binns

Thinking Warrior
Huw Wilkins

The first shot comes without warning, an arrow-straight bolt of red lightning on the *Flashpoint* overlay. The target, a young man now designated Casualty #1 by the tactical system, drops without a sound.

I chamber a smoke round and fire it up into the air to obscure the sniper's view, then sweep the blank-fronted tower block with the microwave radar.

The gunman is moving, running down a corridor heading for the stairwell. I lock on with the main 10mm co-axial and fire a short burst of a/p through the wall. He goes down hard.

'Crowd control,' I send over the secure link to Castor. 'Get the civilians into cover. There's probably more where he came from.'

I hear the boom of Castor's amplified voice almost immediately instructing people to run for the protection of the hospital's white stucco walls. He repeats the message in Portuguese then Crioulo.

'Technical crossing Estrada,' Castor says over the link. 'Engaging left.'

I send a sensor sweep down that flank and pick up the ragged Dodge pickup with an Israeli microcalibre support weapon lashed onto the flatbed. Castor opens up and shreds it from end to end before they even get a shot off.

I pop more smoke overhead to guard us from any more fire coming down from the concrete housing blocks opposite.

A bullet strikes my armour and ricochets away with a shrill whirr. I scan back down its path and pick out a loose group of figures advancing from behind the barricades at the base of the Cathedrale. A few civilians are huddling in the building's doorway; a mother

shelters her child with her body as the rebel militiamen run past.

‘Troops rounding the Cathedrale,’ I send to Castor. ‘Engaging right.’

The ammunition feeds across the back of my chassis click over as I switch from armour-piercing to frangible rounds. One by one I begin picking off the gunmen, directing fire away from the civilians.

A second stream of bright tracers crosses mine, jacketed bullets punching through the fragile barricades and the Cathedrale walls with equal ease. I see the people sheltering in the doorway vanish in a maelstrom of dust, shattered stonework and blood.

Castor.

‘Jesus!’ I scream over the link. ‘Switch to frangible! Non-corns in your line of fire! Non-coms in your line of fire!’

‘What? What?’ he sends.

‘Adjust your fire. There’s civilians in that group!’

‘I…’ Castor says but the link cuts dead before he finishes.

A tenth of a second later the concussion hits me and I see Castor’s wrecked chassis tumble along the ground in a mass of flames. A second RPG slices through the smoke looking for me.

My engine screams at the rev limiter as I surge forward out of the way, my tracks kicking up twin plumes ofdust. I probe back along the road and find the rebel soldier still fitting a new warhead to the launch tube.

I return fire through the haze and the wall of the building he’s using for cover. The impact of the bullets throws him out into the street in a mess oftangled limbs.

‘Dammit,’ Castor sends over the secondary link. ‘I’m dead. Damnit.’
‘You weren’t covering your flank,’ I reply.

‘I… I know,’ he sends, his tone a contrite mixture of embarrassment and apology. ‘This would never have happened in version eleven.’

‘I’ll finish this up then we can run a simpler simulation to settle you in.’

‘Okay. Good. Okay. We… we… ww…’

His speech tails off into a high-pitched garble of random sounds. ‘Castor? Are you all right?’ I send. ‘I’ll beep Marti.’

I try to hook into the lab’s communications system but get no response. The frame rate of the world gets choppy and a brief burst of rain sweeps out of a clear sky.

‘Castor?’ I send again with more urgency. ‘Are you there? Something’s happening to the system.’

Then everything goes black and silent as the universe crashes around me.

‘Go right in, sir,’ the secretary said, waving towards the door with his free hand. ‘Ms Carthy is expecting you. Would you like coffee or tea sent in?’

Ordell paused for a moment. ‘Is Julia having any?’

‘She and her guest ordered some coffee, yes.’

‘Okay, then,’ Ordell said. ‘I’ll have coffee, please.’

‘On its way,’ the secretary said with a nod, already keying the request into his desk computer.

Ordell gave him a brief, polite smile and opened the door. The office on the other side was large and well furnished, with a wide desk of pale wood that reflected the light from a broad set of windows onto a wall full of certificates, photographs and awards.

‘Simon,’ said a tall woman, rising from her seat behind the desk.

About fifty years old, she was dressed in the severe corporate style inherited from America. Her suit was a dark collection of discreet pinstripe and sharp creases that contrasted strongly with the carefully arranged blonde wave of her hair.

‘Glad you could make it so quickly.’ She held out her hand.

‘No problem, Julia,’ Ordell said. He stepped inside and took her hand, squeezing it in a momentary shake. He glanced at a second figure seated beside the desk.

‘This is David Gordon,’ Carthy said, indicating the man. ‘He’s with Perseus Corporation’s central security office.’

Gordon stood and offered his hand. ‘Please to meet you, Major,’ he said with a winning smile as Ordell shook his hand. He was dressed in a conservative business suit that failed to hide the fact he was fitter and more muscular than the average executive.

‘Likewise,’ Ordell said. Carthy nodded to a spare chair and he sat down. ‘So,’ he said. ‘I gather there’s been some trouble overnight?’

Carthy nodded and sat down again. She brushed a speck of fluff from the sleeve of her jacket with a sigh of irritation. ‘That would be something of an understatement,’ she said.

‘Hackers managed to get a connection into the AI lab during the night,’ Gordon said. ‘They wiped the GridEngine and pretty much anything else they could get their hands on.’

Ordell raised his eyebrows. ‘How the hell did they manage that? I thought we were supposed to have a secure network here?’

‘Not secure enough, apparently,’ Carthy said, looking pointedly at Gordon.

Gordon sighed and held up his hands. ‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘We’ve got people reviewing the last security audit at the moment.’

Ordell rubbed his chin and grimaced. ‘How long will this set us

back?' he asked.

'We don't know yet. Marti's got the latest backups back from storage and he's working on getting the GridEngine up and running again. His best guess was up to a week to get Castor and the simulations back on line at full capacity, then a few days more to catch up the work lost between back-ups. So, say two weeks until we're back where we were yesterday,' Carthy said.

'Well, I guess that could be worse,' Ordell said, relief evident in his voice. 'So it's still not out of the question to deliver by the end of the year then?'

Carthy pursed her lips. 'I don't know. All of the project staff have been suspended until Mr Gordon here can reassure himself they weren't involved,' she said, a hint of annoyance breaking through her urbane control.

'Don't worry too much about that, Julia,' Gordon said reassuringly. 'It's just a standard part of the investigation procedure in cases like these. We should be done with that process before your systems are back running again. Statistically speaking, nearly eighty per cent of data thefts are inside jobs, so we can't ignore the possibility.'

Ordell glanced sharply at Gordon. 'You didn't mention them stealing our data.'

'We haven't confirmed that they even tried to steal anything yet,' Carthy said.

'It's the most obvious motive though, you must agree,' Gordon replied.

'Despite its evident shortcomings our network security really is the best money can buy; the time and effort required to compromise it suggests the perpetrators had a good reason for doing so.'

'It could have been an attempt by Grumman or Lockheed to set us back,' Ordell said. 'The board's... amendments to the specification have delayed delivery so many times, it's common knowledge our

CMO contract is under review. Maybe a competitor thought they might be able to tip it in their favour ifour deadlines slipped again.'

Gordon nodded, but looked doubtful. 'We're not ruling it out, of course, but once you're in, why not take what you can rather than just trashing the mainframe?' He sighed and shrugged almost imperceptibly. 'Either way one or other of the American arms manufacturers is most likely behind it.'

'I guess that's true,' Ordell said, acknowledging the point with a nod.

A knock sounded at the door. It opened a moment later and Carthy's secretary entered carefully carrying a tray with both hands.

'Oh, thank you, Martin,' Carthy said. She stood up and bent over her desk to push papers out of the way to clear a space. 'Just here, please,' she said, tapping the bare patch of wood she had uncovered.

He set the tray down in the space indicated. 'Your guest has cleared security on the ground floor,' he said, straightening up. 'He's being escorted up now.'

'Ah, good,' Carthy said. 'Make him comfortable when he gets up here, could you? We'll be out in a few minutes.'

'No problem,' the secretary said. He turned and left, shutting the door behind himself with barely a click.

'A guest? Today?' Ordell asked, surprised.

Carthy shook her head. 'Not by choice, I assure you,' she said. She picked up the coffee pot from the tray and poured three cupfuls.

'He's a CMO investigator,' Gordon said, pronouncing the acronym as one word: *see-mo.* He picked up one of the small cups and dropped three rough lumps of brown sugar into it one after the other.

‘That’s… awfully fast of them,’ Ordell said. He took one of the remaining cups and sipped from it, not bothering with sweetener or cream.

‘More than you know,’ Carthy said with a rueful chuckle. ‘He called me at ten past five this morning. Only fifteen minutes after the call from security woke me. Got me out of the shower, too.’

‘News travels fast,’ Ordell said, pulling an exaggerated expression of surprise.

‘We’re looking into that, too,’ Gordon said.

‘I’ll bet you are.’

‘CMO’s sending us a message,’ Carthy said. ‘They had someone ready and waiting for something to go wrong. They want to make sure we know the pressure’s on.’

‘I think we can say that it’s been received,’ Ordell said. ‘Do you think he’s a for-real investigator, or just for show?’

‘I haven’t been able to find out much about him, so far,’ Gordon said. ‘It doesn’t help that he insists on just going by his title rather than giving us a name. We’ll know more in a few hours once we’ve been able to shake a few trees at the UN.’

‘There’s something odd about him, for sure,’ Carthy said. ‘He doesn’t carry a PAN, for one thing. The security guys were having to issue him with an honest-to-God swipe card when I brought him in.’

‘I’m amazed those rentacops could work the machine,’ Ordell said dismissively.

‘They couldn’t,’ Carthy said, shooting another glance at Gordon. ‘I think he’s used to it though, he was showing them how to use it when I left.’

‘We do train them on those as well,’ Gordon objected. ‘It just

doesn't come up very often.'

Ordell shrugged. 'What're you going to do with him?' he asked Carthy.

'I'd like you to look after him for a couple of days, Simon. You and Marti are the only members of the project team not on suspension, and Marti has his hands full right now.'

'Me? I'm not sure...' Ordell stuttered.

'It's just temporary. I'm going to be busy for a day or two smoothing ruffled feathers - half the board has called me this morning already. Besides, you're an external advisor appointed through the UN, rather like he is. It might present a more open face than a Perseus employee could.'

'Okay, then,' Ordell said, slightly doubtfully. 'How do you want me to handle him?'

Carthy shook her head. 'Don't try to "handle" him. I'm sure he'll be expecting that. Just show him around, answer all his questions and keep an eye on him. Our contract with CMO allows him access to any information concerning the Peacekeeper project, so you can take him down to the lab but keep him away from the other project areas, okay?'

'Fine.'

'He may ask about the *Flashpoint* countersniper system,' Gordon said. 'That's a bit of a legal grey area, so refer it back to me or Julia if it comes up.'

'Do you think that's likely?'

'Not sure, but I want to limit the number of projects we have to open up to scrutiny. You know how stuff leaks from UN offices,' Gordon said, raising an eyebrow at Ordell.

Ordell frowned. 'Thanks for reminding me,' he said and shot a

deeply insincere smile back at the security man.

‘Sorry,’ Gordon said and held up a hand in a gesture of supplication. ‘I didn’t mean anything by that.’

‘And don’t mention anything about those amendments to the specification,’ Carthy said. ‘That’s still privileged information that affects other projects CMO doesn’t have a legal right to know about.’

‘I know, okay? You’ve explained that enough times before; I know,’ Ordell said, gesturing irritably with his hands.

‘He should be here by now,’ Carthy said. ‘Martin will show you where he is.’

Ordell glanced at Gordon and held eye contact just a few seconds longer than was comfortable, then stood and nodded to Carthy. ‘I’ll go make a start then.’

‘Good. I’ll block out some time for lunch,’ Carthy said. ‘Bring him up to the restaurant at about one o’clock.’

‘I will. See you then,’ Ordell said. ‘Pleasure meeting you, Mr Gordon.’

‘Likewise, Major,’ Gordon said, toasting him with his coffee. Ordell turned smartly and left.

Carthy felt the tension rise in the room as the door closed behind Ordell. Gordon was tapping his fingers lightly on the desk as he watched him go. ‘You’re sure?’ he asked, still looking at the door.

‘Yes,’ Carthy said. ‘He’ll back Perseus all the way; he knows which side his bread’s buttered.’

‘Good enough,’ Gordon said, nodding slowly.

Carthy’s secretary, Martin, showed Ordell down the corridor to the open space around the stairwell that was set out as an informal

meeting area and waiting room. A broad light well ran down one side of the room and the day's grey weather gave the light a gritty texture as it mixed with the overhead fluorescents.

A tall man with long hair that brushed the top of his unfashionably high collar was sitting on a low, padded bench, sipping tea from a cup bearing the winged sword logo of Perseus Dynamics. He was leafing through a glossy brochure one handed, seemingly engrossed by its content. A slim line ofjagged scar tissue was visible on the inside of his wrist where it emerged from the cuff of his sharply tailored green coat.

'Doctor?' Martin asked, walking up with Ordell.

'Oh, yes?' the man said, jumping slightly in surprise.

'This is Major Simon Ordell, the military advisor on the Peacekeeper project,' Martin said, indicating Ordell.

'Doctor,' Ordell said, holding out a hand.

The Doctor stood and hesitated for a moment as he realised both hands were full. He tucked the brochure under his arm and shook Ordell's hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Major,' he said, smiling.

'Simon, please,' Ordell said. He kept the handshake light, and brief. 'Almost everyone here is a civilian, so I don't have much cause to use my rank.'

'Very well,' the Doctor said, broadening his smile and affecting a minimalist bow.

'I'll leave you to it,' Martin said. 'You have my extension number if there's anything else I can do for you, Doctor.'

'I do, thank you,' the Doctor said.

Martin nodded to Ordell and walked off back towards his desk outside Carthy's office.

‘So,’ Ordell said slightly awkwardly. ‘What can we do for you, Doctor?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘It’s just a bit of handholding for Conflict Management Oversight, really. A few of them are a bit jittery over the delays in the project, and what with last night’s problem they wanted the reassurance of their own man on the scene.’

Ordell nodded. ‘I see. I know we’ve slipped a bit on delivery, but it’s not like this is a simple project.’

‘Oh, I quite agree, Major. Still, you must understand that CMO is under a huge amount of pressure from both Europe and the US Alliance. Alliance security forces have already threatened to withdraw troops from peacekeeping duties unless something is done about the casualties in Guinea Bissau.’

‘I know. The fighting’s been bad in the capital for months now. Twelve members of my regiment were killed just a fortnight ago,’ Ordell said.

‘You’re in the Royal Marines, aren’t you?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Ordell confirmed, nodding. ‘Though I’ve been acting as military advisor to Perseus for nearly two years now.’

‘Good work?’

‘Well... it’s different, anyway. Safer than doing a peacekeeping tour, which makes my wife glad. Maybe less rewarding though, at least in the short term.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The rewards are longer term in this case, but just as worthy, I think.’

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong, Doctor. I believe in the Peacekeeper project one hundred per cent. I just sometimes feel... ‘ Ordell hesitated and sighed. ‘I don’t know. Maybe just a bit out of the loop.’

‘Well, with any luck, you’ll be back out there making a difference soon.’

Ordell nodded slowly, then flashed a brief smile. ‘Still, I’m sure you didn’t come here to hear me list my problems for you. I’ll spare you the details.’

‘No need on my account, Major. I like to think I help out wherever I can.’

‘Well, I think we’d best make sure CMO’s happy first.’

‘Yes, you’re right of course,’ the Doctor said. ‘What can you tell me about what happened last night?’

‘I know the outline of it, but if you want the technical details you’ll need to speak to Marti Elser; he’s the project’s technical lead.’

‘Is Marti in yet?’

‘Yes. I understand he’s down in the secure lab working on fixing the damage.’

‘Fine, fine. Well, maybe we should go down and see him. You can give me the overview on the way.’

‘No problem,’ Ordell said. He indicated the stairwell. ‘This way,’ he said. The Doctor took the lead and pushed through the double fire doors. ‘I prefer the stairs myself,’ he said, ‘but I’m surprised I haven’t seen anyone use the lifts yet.’

Ordell chuckled. ‘You haven’t been into a Perseus building before then?’

‘First time, I’m afraid. Is it that obvious?’

‘It’s some directive from the Perseus board a few years ago. Encouraging fitness in their staff, you see. A fit worker is a productive worker, or some such crap.’

The Doctor began to descend the broad stairway, strolling easily down the wide steps. ‘Seems like a fine idea to me.’

‘There’s more, of course. If they think you’re overweight they load a directive into the computers so it’ll only let you buy healthy snacks and drinks from the vending machines in the basement and the lifts will refuse to work if they detect your PAN inside.’

The Doctor laughed. ‘I imagine that adds a little premium to the black market chocolate around here then.’

‘You’d be surprised. By the time you reach the sixth floor, where the computer programmers work, a Coke is practically worth its weight in gold,’ Ordell said deadpan.

‘I’ll be sure to bear that in mind if I’m a little short,’ the Doctor chuckled, his eyes wrinkling with amusement.

‘Anyway, last night,’ Ordell said, his tone becoming more businesslike.

‘Yes, go on,’ the Doctor said.

‘At about three o’clock someone managed to gain access to the internal network for the Peacekeeper project. The security guys are working on the details, of course, but I gather there’s not a lot left to work with.’

The crackers covered their tracks?’

‘Well, not so much covered as obliterated. Every piece of hardware they could get their hands on was wiped clean. About the only thing that survived was Pollux, the beta version intelligence core. The biggest loss was the GridEngine mainframe, of course, but a lot of other bits and pieces, documentation, project plans and the like were lost as well.’

The Doctor nodded. He ran his hand lightly over the polished wooden banister, fingertips just brushing the surface. ‘What was on the mainframe?’

‘Well, lots of stuff, but the two main things were Castor, the alpha version neural network simulation, and the software that runs the virtual realities we use for training and evaluation.’

‘So, very much the core of the project then?’

‘Oh, yeah. Everything ran off the GridEngine. Without that we’re pretty much dead in the water.’

‘I see. Is there any evidence of data being copied off the network?’

‘Not so far,’ Ordell said. ‘It’s being looked into, but it’s difficult to tell what with all the chaos down there.’

The Doctor stepped down onto the ground floor and pushed through another set of fire doors into the main atrium of the building. He took a moment to look around, gazing unselfconsciously up at the high glass ceiling and boxes of trailing plants that spilled over the edges of artfully utilitarian structural members. In the centre of the floor was a low fountain, tiny inch-high jets of water playing over cracked paving slabs in a shallow indentation.

The back wall of the building was entirely made of glass, a gracefully tiered cascade that descended in storey-high steps until it reached a low curtain wall at the ground. At the far end, opposite the main entrance, was a wide, open desk with a small crew of receptionists sitting at sleek terminals. Behind them was a tall chromium sculpture of the winged sword logo of Perseus Dynamics.

Closer to the main doors, where no visitor could fail to notice it, was the low, sleek form of the latest model BMW sports car.

‘It’s a prize,’ Ordell said, noticing the Doctor’s gaze. ‘They raffle one off every month to employees who’ve recommended a new hire.’

‘Some prize,’ the Doctor said.

‘Well, Perseus is pretty aggressive about attracting the right

people.'

'So it would seem.'

'This way,' Ordell said. He struck out across the polished floor of pale marble. He took the Doctor's arm lightly and guided him to one side. 'Careful. A lot of first-time visitors are so busy looking at the architecture they walk straight into the fountain.'

'Really?' the Doctor asked incredulously.

'Well, you were heading right for it just now,' Ordell replied, raising an eyebrow. 'You can always spot the new starters. Wet ankles, looking for the lifts.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Thanks for sparing me the embarrassment then.'

'Don't mention it, Doctor,' Ordell said, leading them up to a heavy door that was set into a deep arch in the wall. Embedded in the lintel was a steel panel with a single red light glowing in the middle.

'Er...' Ordell said doubtfully. 'This usually just detects your PAN and lets you in if you're authorised.' He held up his own PAN and pressed his thumb into the identification slot. The red light stayed on.

'How about this?' the Doctor said. He fished a slim wafer of plastic out of his pocket and waved it over a discreet black plastic box set into the side of the arch. The light above the door turned green and there was a loud click as the magnetic locks disengaged

Ordell peered at the box. 'Never noticed that before,' he said.

'I've been getting quite used to hunting them out since PANs were introduced,' the Doctor said.

'Good job, too,' Ordell acknowledged. He pushed the heavy door open and held it for the Doctor.

Beyond the door was a short corridor, its bland institutional decor at odds with the grandeur of the atrium. Two guards, both conspicuously carrying handguns and TASER weapons in belt holsters, were flanking another security door a few metres further in.

‘All the project labs are down here,’ Ordell said, ‘so we’ll have to do a more formal ID before we can go on.’

He walked up to the guards and nodded to them. ‘Terry,’ he said. ‘Dave. How’s it going?’

‘Same old, same old,’ Terry said. ‘Step up for identification please, sir.’

Ordell turned to face the blunt muzzle of a steel and plastic device attached to the wall. There was a momentary fan of bright laser light across his face, collapsing swiftly down to a band across his eyes.

‘Okay, you’re good to go, sir,’ the other guard said as a confirmation popped up on the ruggedised PAN strapped to his wrist. He turned to the Doctor and politely indicated that he should do the same as Ordell.

‘He doesn’t have a PAN,’ Ordell said, rubbing one eye. ‘You’ll have to check his patterns against his card.’

The Doctor held up his card expectantly, turning it to show the silver logo embossed on the front.

‘Step up to the scanner please, sir,’ Terry said, taking the card. He pressed it against the face of his PAN for a moment, allowing the device to read its contents.

The Doctor walked forward and copied Ordell’s action of peering into the scanner. He blinked in surprise as the laser briefly dazzled him. ‘Good match on the iris and retina patterns,’ Dave said, consulting his PAN. ‘You’re both clear to go down.’ He held out the

Doctor's card.

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, taking it back. He tucked it into an inside pocket of his coat.

'Have a nice day, gentlemen,' Terry said cheerfully as Ordell leaned his weight against the inner security door.

Beyond the door was an open lounge area. A couple of ugly vending machines hunkered in a corner but most of the space was taken up by a random scatter of low sofas and beanbag chairs. A few people were dotted around the room, most sitting alone and reading, a few in small groups chatting over coffee. The walls were covered with large posters, most depicting idyllic outdoor scenes.

'This is the project lounge,' Ordell said. 'It's just here to save everyone having to go through the security checkpoint all the time.'

The Doctor nodded. 'No windows, I notice,' he said.

'Security again. You're not allowed to take any sensitive materials where they could be seen from an unsecured area.'

The Doctor squinted at the ceiling, taking in the mismatched clusters of lights recessed into the tiles. 'Good light though.'

'Oh, yeah, they're really proud of that. There's a panel on the wall where you can select environments and it will replicate the light quality. It's an offshoot from some of the training and simulation technologies they make here. Gives it a bit more of an outdoorsy feel.'

'Works well,' the Doctor said. It was true that the room didn't have the enclosed feel that its windowless walls should have engendered. 'Where's this light from?'

Ordell glanced up. 'Alpine meadow, I think. That's the usual favourite.' He pointed to a broad corridor that led off opposite the door through which they had entered. 'Down here.'

The corridor was equipped only with standard fluorescent tubes and the walls seemed to subliminally close in on them as they walked down it. Ordell led them around a corner and up to another heavy security door. Set into its lintel was another steel panel with a glowing red light. He pulled out his PAN and thumbed the ID button.

‘There, I think,’ he said, pointing to another black card-reader mounted beside the frame. The Doctor pulled out his card again and pressed it against the box.

The light turned green and the door vibrated as the locks disengaged. ‘Does the whole place use PAN security?’ the Doctor asked as Ordell pushed the heavy door open.

‘Pretty much,’ he replied. ‘It’s a good system. Biometric checks at all points. I don’t think they’d usually let anyone use the old card system unless they’re a special case.’

The Doctor nodded as he followed Ordell in.

‘Okay, here we are,’ Ordell said. ‘This is the Peacekeeper project lab.’

An island of desks took up the centre of the long room, each one separated from the others by chest-high dividers on which a mess of shelves, notes, posters and photographs were pinned. Most of the desks had at least two, often more, expensive computer terminals on them. Beyond this was a set of technical workbenches that backed onto a glass-walled room that contained an array of tall boxes.

‘That’s the GridEngine in there,’ Ordell said, indicating the glass room. ‘Most of the actual work’s done out here though. I’ll see if I can find Marti.’

Ordell skirted the desks and walked to the back of the room. He leaned over one of the workbenches and tapped on the glass with his knuckles. A moment later a short, dark-haired man with a fastidiously trimmed goatee beard appeared, peering between the

twin rows of computer racks. He saw Ordell and waved a greeting. Ordell beckoned for him to come out.

‘Morning, Simon,’ the man said as he opened the door of the glass room and exited in a gust of cool, processed air.

‘Marti,’ Ordell said, nodding. ‘This is the Doctor.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Dr Elser,’ the Doctor said, holding out his hand.

‘Oh, hi,’ Elser said, a little doubtfully. He gripped the Doctor’s hand and gave it a weak squeeze. ‘Are you another of the security guys?’

‘No, I’m from CMO,’ the Doctor said.

‘Didn’t you get the email?’ Ordell asked.

‘No, sorry. I’ve been in with the GridEngine ever since I arrived.’ Ordell sniffed. ‘Doesn’t matter. It just said that the Doctor here’s a CMO investigator and that you’re to extend every courtesy. The usual drill.’

‘CMO checking up on us?’ Elser asked, turning to face the Doctor.

‘Yes, but I confess it’s more for show than anything else. It’s just the CMO board covering themselves. Got to make sure they can say they did their due diligence, you know,’ the Doctor said, his tone one of resigned amusement.

‘Politics,’ Elser said disdainfully.

‘That’s about the shape of it,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ll try to keep out of the way as much as possible, have a bit of a poke around so I can justify my report and leave it at that.’

‘Well, there’s not much I can tell you at the moment, Doctor,’ Elser said.

‘How’s the recovery going?’ the Doctor asked.

Elser glanced at Ordell.

‘It’s okay, Marti. The Doctor’s cleared for all the project-specific details.’

‘Well,’ Elser said, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘There’s good news and bad news. We haven’t really lost much data; it’s all on the backups, but the GridEngine’s still refusing to boot fifteen of its nodes.’

‘The backups didn’t restore them?’ Ordell asked.

Elser shrugged. ‘We have the data, but this kind of heavy iron doesn’t like being shut down like it was last night. I’ll probably have to rebuild those nodes from scratch and just restore the files once they’re running.’

‘What’s your estimate on the setback then?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Pretty much what I told Julia still. I’ll have to put in a few long days, but it’s all recoverable.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That doesn’t sound too bad then. Would it be possible for me to have access to the files you’ve restored so far?’

‘Sure,’ Elser said. He sat down at one of the terminals and wiggled the mouse to take the screensaver off. ‘I’ll set you up with a team login so you can get into the system. You’ll be able to get the documents and project plans, but Castor won’t be back up until we have a few more working nodes.’

‘I understand that Pollux wasn’t affected by the break in?’

Elser nodded, his eyes still fixed on the screen. ‘Yeah. He says they scanned his network connections, but I guess they couldn’t work out what he was so they left him alone.’

‘May I talk with him?’

‘He’s over here,’ Ordell said. ‘We’ll leave you to it for a bit, Marti, okay?’

‘Sure,’ Elser said. ‘I’ll let you know your login details in a minute, Doctor, but then I’ll have to be getting back to the GridEngine.’

‘Thank you, Marti,’ the Doctor said.

Ordell led him over to the corner of the room. Sitting on the workbench was an angular metal object about the size of a briefcase surrounded by a festoon of wires connecting it to a stack of computers, test gear and monitors. Just to one side was a dark plastic dome that emitted a quiet mechanical whine. Opposite that was a wide high- resolution screen showing a dense tangle of lines picked out in a slowly pulsing spectrum of colours.

‘Hello, Pollux. How are you feeling?’ Ordell said.

‘I’m fine, thank you, Major. A little shaken after last night still, but otherwise unhurt,’ said a beautifully modulated androgynous voice from a pair of cheap multimedia speakers hidden behind the cradle of wires.

‘This is the Doctor, an investigator from CMO.’

‘Yes, I overheard your conversation with Marti. I’m pleased to meet you, Doctor.’

‘Likewise, I’m sure, Pollux,’ the Doctor said. He glanced around the test setup for a moment. ‘Can you see me?’

‘Very well,’ Pollux said. ‘I’m hooked up to the sensor dome on the right.’

‘Ah, of course,’ the Doctor said. He leaned forward and, shading his eyes, peered into the translucent plastic dome.

‘It’s a variant of the optical sensor package Dynamics developed for the Jicarilla Apache project. It’s got visual spectrum, infrared, ultraviolet, even microwave radar and laser designators all in one

box,' Ordell said. 'It's the main vision system for the Peacekeepers.'

The Doctor crossed his arms self-consciously. 'Impressive you managed to at all that in there.'

'Perseus has made some revolutionary breakthroughs in miniaturising this kind of thing,' Ordell said. 'I don't understand all the details, but it's ten years or more ahead of what Lockheed Martin's trying to push.'

The Doctor looked at the colourful display on the screen again. 'What's this?' he asked.

'It's a diagnostic overview of my neural network,' Pollux said. 'The colours denote different kinds and amounts of activity. Watch this.'

As soon as the words were spoken a bright crimson bloom spread across the right side of the image. As it grew it split up into sinuous tentacles that reached right across to the other side of the screen.

'What happened?' the Doctor asked.

'I just activated my fire control systems and recalled one of the battle simulations I've run. It causes a lot of subsystem processing, so a large part of the diagram turns bright red.'

The Doctor watched the pattern for a minute as it faded gradually back to the even blues and yellows it had expressed originally. 'It's quite beautiful.'

'Thank you,' said Pollux.

Ordell grinned. 'I know. It's kind of hypnotic, isn't it? I sometimes spend more time watching that than anything else when we're running simulations,' be confessed.

'Could you spare me a few minutes to talk about last night, Pollux?' the Doctor asked.

'Of course, Doctor,' Pollux said. 'I've nothing much to do at the

moment. I can't even chat to Castor until the GridEngine is back up.'

'I'll leave you to it for a little while, if you don't mind,' Ordell said. 'I'd like to check what state my files are in.'

'No, go ahead, Major,' the Doctor said.

'Okay. I'll only be over there at my workstation,' Ordell said. 'Shout if you need anything. Talk to you later, Pollux.'

'Goodbye, Major,' Pollux said politely as Ordell walked away.

The Doctor turned and pulled one of the spare chairs over from an empty desk and sat down beside the workbench. He crossed his arms comfortably across his chest and rested one foot on top of a computer case on the floor.

'I must admit I was expecting something a little bigger,' the Doctor said, looking at the armoured box amidst the wires.

'I'm pretty much a solid optical network inside here,' Pollux said. 'It's all custom-built from the ground up, so they can make it pretty compact. You only need something like the GridEngine if you want to run the whole system in simulation.'

'That's what Castor is?'

'Yes. He's the development model. All his hardware is just a virtual model run on the computer. I can't be modified once my network's been grown.'

The Doctor nodded. 'So, tell me about last night.'

'Marti went home just after eleven o'clock. They'd just booted up a new version of Castor, and that always makes for a long day. We were chatting over the network, getting to know each other again...'

'I'm sorry?' the Doctor interrupted. 'What do you mean getting to know each other again?'

‘Castor’s always a little different in each version. He can access all the memories of the previous versions, but he’s always got a few… it’s hard to describe. A new perspective, maybe?’ Pollux said uncertainly. A tint of yellow spread along the centre of the screen like a slow curl of smoke.

‘I see. Which version was he last night?’

‘The newest version is 12.3, but I expect he’ll be back on version 12.2 when they get him running from the backups again.’

‘Which version are you, if that’s not a personal question?’

The speakers emitted a short staccato rattle. ‘Sorry,’ Pollux said, sounding a little embarrassed. ‘My voice synthesiser’s pretty good, but it can’t do laughter well. I’m a 10.8.’

The Doctor nodded slowly. didn’t realise they were still developing the artificial intelligence core at such a rate.’

‘They’re always tweaking Castor. Sometimes they version him every couple of days.’

‘That must be a little… well, disorienting for him?’

‘Sometimes it is. On a couple of occasions the version wasn’t stable, and Castor…’ Pollux trailed off.

‘Yes?’ the Doctor prodded.

‘It’s hard to describe if you haven’t seen it happen. I gather from the team that it’s a bit like a degenerative mental illness, but much accelerated. He would develop obsessive behaviour, exhibit rapid personality changes, talk gibberish. It was distressing to witness it.’

‘I can imagine,’ the Doctor said sympathetically. He glanced at the screen again where the same yellow taint as before was displacing the calm blue. Was the latest version at all unstable?’

‘Not that I noticed,’ Pollux said. ‘He seemed more tightly focused than the previous version, but not obsessively so. I was expecting that since the latest version modifications have been on goal selection, but I think his ability to multitask suffered a bit.’

‘What did you do next?’

‘Castor wanted to run a simulation. We’re given freedom to run mission simulations overnight if no other jobs are running. It all gets logged for analysis, so it’s all productive time on the GridEngine they wouldn’t otherwise have.’

‘Which simulation did you pick?’

‘It was an evolving area protection simulation set in central Bissau. We were defending a checkpoint outside the Hopital Simao Mendes from sniper fire and then from a ground assault Do you want the log code?’

‘Not right now, thanks,’ the Doctor said. ‘How did it go?’

‘Not all that well. We started clearing the snipers, but Castor got distracted and was taken out by an RPG when the FDV ground troops managed to flank him.’

‘How did Castor take that?’

‘He didn’t sound too happy. It was a stupid mistake. He said he thought he would never have been caught like that in version eleven. It’s always difficult for Castor when they version him. I was trying to persuade him to run another sim, something a little simpler maybe to let him adjust a bit, when it happened.’

‘The attack?’

‘Yes. Castor started repeating himself, just the odd word here and there at first but he just dissolved into random sounds after a few seconds. I thought it was another unstable version going bad, so I tried to access the alert system to beep Marti, but I couldn’t get a connection to the system. I started to try to connect to other stuff on

the network, but it was all crashing around me.'

On the screen the familiar spread of yellow appeared, but this time thin bars of deep red flanked it on both sides.

'Did they try to attack you?'

'A couple of minutes after Castor went down some process on the GridEngine probed my network ports pretty thoroughly. I think whoever it was thought I was some kind of customised network server and was trying to work out exactly what I was. I stopped responding to connections and that seemed to convince them that I'd crashed along with all the other gear.'

The Doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully, watching the screen. 'What did you do then?'

'There wasn't a lot I could do. I had no way ofcontacting the outside world, so I just had to sit here and wait until Marti got in a couple of hours later.'

'Must have been boring for you.'

'I'm used to it. It's the same mixture of boredom and anxiety I get standing at a guard post in the simulations.'

'You do feel anxiety, then?'

Pollux's sensor dome whirred for a moment, then settled back into silence. 'Yes,' he said. 'Castor and I are sentient, as far as the team can tell. We have emotions, but our neural networks have been designed and evolved to deal with that kind of stress synergistic ally.'

'Which means?'

The odd rattle sounded from the speakers again. 'You skipped reading the Perseus brochures, I see,' Pollux said.

'Ah,' the Doctor said. He smiled embarrassedly at the sensor dome.

‘I must confess I did. I’ve read most of the progress reports, but they haven’t been got at by the marketing department.’

‘Our designs have been through millions of test iterations on the GridEngine, looking for configurations that were emotionally stable. Most ofMarti and the team’s efforts have actually gone into making the system that evaluates and tests each iteration of the neural network. They design that system, then that system designs us.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor said, nodding slowly.

‘How are you two getting on?’ Elser asked, appearing suddenly beside the table.

The Doctor jumped. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t hear you walk up.’

‘My fault,’ Elser said. ‘I was in such a rush this morning that I came out without my shoes.’ He pointed at the threadbare pair of carpet slippers on his feet.

The Doctor chuckled. ‘Now, that’s dedication,’ he said.

Gordon peeled back the wrapper on his sandwich and parted the slices of brown bread suspiciously.

‘They’re really very good, you know,’ Carthy said, eyebrow raised. She popped the cap on her bottle of spring water and took a sip.

‘Sorry,’ Gordon said, slapping the sandwich back together. ‘I spend all my time going from place to place so I’ve learned never to trust a staff canteen to make an edible lunch.’

Carthy laughed. ‘Must take it out of you, being suspicious all the time.’ ‘It’s worth the effort for a good sandwich,’ he said, flashing a brief smile. He bit into the bread and nodded approvingly.

Carthy prodded at her salad with a fork, shuffling a few of the lush green leaves around. She eyed the jumble of chicken, onions and mayonnaise in Gordon’s lunch. ‘Not going for the healthy option, I see,’ she said.

Gordon smiled around the mouthful. ‘I leave that to you lifestyle execs,’ he Said after he swallowed.

Carthy frowned briefly and forked a pile of leaves into her mouth. They ate in silence for a minute.

Gordon kept glancing at the glass doors, his eyes flicking back and forth as his interest wavered between them and his lunch. Beyond the doors was a wide balcony that looked out over the atrium and further through the transparent back wall to the gardens behind Buckingham Palace.

‘The Doctor and Ordell should be up soon,’ Carthy said.

‘It’s not that. Phil Green said he was going to meet me here. He wants to take a look at the Doctor.’

Carthy arched an eyebrow. ‘I didn’t know this had risen so far in the security division.’

Gordon shrugged. ‘I gave him a call this morning about finding out some more about the Doctor. He called back about an hour ago and said he was coming down.’

‘What’s he found out?’ Carthy asked.

‘He didn’t give me all the details. He’ll fill you in when he gets here,’ Gordon mumbled as he swallowed. ‘Ah, here he is.’

He stood up and raised a hand in the direction of the doors. A tall, blandly handsome man answered the wave and began picking his way between the tables to where they sat.

‘David,’ he said, smiling as he approached. ‘Good to see you again.’
‘Phillip. This is Julia Carthy, manager of the Peacekeeper project.’
Carthy stood and offered her hand. Green took it and squeezed it firmly without shaking. ‘Pleased to meet you at last, Julia. I’ve heard nothing but good reports.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ Carthy said. She sat down again and Green slid smoothly into the seat next to Gordon.

Sitting side by side it was clear how uncomfortable Gordon really was in a salt. Next to Green’s urbane sheen of exquisite tailoring and fastidious rooming it looked like his veneer of civilisation was paper- thin.

‘So, David tells me you want to have a look at the Doctor,’ Carthy said.

Green nodded. ‘I do indeed,’ he said. ‘He’s a rather exciting conundrum. I still don’t know what his name is, but I got an interesting lead from an ex mercenary who was in Zimbabwe during the war.’ He turned to Gordon. ‘A colleague of yours, I believe.’

Gordon hesitated with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. ‘Who?’ ‘Armand Lemieux.’

Gordon rolled his eyes. ‘Take what he says with a pinch of salt. He was always a little too fond of the old cash-crops.’

‘Well, he’s clean these days, thanks to a Perseus rehab clinic in Brazil, and working for CMO.’

‘Good for him,’ Gordon said after a moment’s awkward pause. ‘And?’ Carthy asked, a slight edge of impatience in her voice. Green inclined his head fractionally in a gesture ofapology.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘he says he heard of the Doctor about fifteen years ago when he was dealing with the first outbreaks of fighting in Guinea Bissau. There was some dodgy UN special ops unit called Broadsword running around doing God knows what. They had an advisor from something called the Unit who was just known as the Doctor.’

‘Fifteen years ago?’ Gordon said with a frown. ‘He’s not old enough, surely?’

‘Descriptions don’t match,’ Green said. ‘Different chap, clearly, but everything else fits. Lemieux said that CMO received a directive from higher up in the UN that if anything happened here they should exercise their contractual right to inspection and contact this Unit group about who to send.’

‘So… what?’ Carthy asked. ‘It’s some kind of code name that this person has inherited?’

‘That’d be my guess,’ Gordon said. He lifted his sandwich and nibbled at the crust with his front teeth.

‘And this Unit thing?’

Green shrugged. ‘I can’t get anywhere near that. A few people said they’d never heard of it. A few more gave me the “can neither confirm or deny” line, which means they probably have heard of it but couldn’t tell me anything. A couple of them owe me big time, too, so it’s not as if they’re holding out on me just for the sake of it.’

‘That’s all?’

‘I found a few oblique references on the internet, but all on nutcase conspiracy sites. Nothing useful. It’s possible it may have been an official organisation once, but it’s gone blacker than black and the records have been purged.’

Carthy took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through her teeth. ‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ she said.

‘Nor me. It’s heavyweight stuff.’

‘I don’t understand why, though,’ Carthy said. ‘I thought this was just CMO trying to pressurise us on delivery. This is… I don’t know what the hell this is.’

‘I think the UN is worried about the source of the attack. If a group like *Filhos De Vieira* sponsored it, and they managed to steal the designs for the Peacekeepers, then we’re looking at another Skunkworks scandal,’ Green said.

‘I was afraid it might be something like that,’ Gordon said, raising his eyebrows at Carthy. He tore a large chunk out of his sandwich and chewed noisily.

‘Shit,’ Carthy said quietly. ‘I’ll have to contact the board. Something like that could bankrupt Dynamics. The compensation to the UN for breach of contract alone would run into billions.’

‘Damn right,’ Gordon said. ‘I don’t know about you, but I exercised my share options two hours ago.’

Carthy rolled her eyes. Green smiled ruefully as if at an unruly child. ‘Just business,’ he said with a shrug. ‘It’s not impossible that we can still keep the lid on this, but we’ll have to take measures.’

‘Such as?’

‘I’ve got some of my technical chaps faking up a set of router logs that implicate a Chinese hacker group who like to vandalise big corporations for the sake of ideology. We’ll substitute those for anything we retrieve for real, then “discover” it tomorrow morning.’

‘They’re not a state sponsored group, are they? We do a lot of business with China - souring that relationship would be almost as bad as having all this come out.’

‘Not officially,’ Gordon said with a sceptical sniff. ‘Even if they are, the secret police will just disappear a few of them and say no more about it. They have it coming anyway. According to the audit they’ve tried to hack PerseusDynamics.com about a hundred times over the past couple of years.’ He grinned at Carthy. ‘Time they learned what it’s like to play with the big boys.’

Carthy pursed her lips. ‘Okay,’ she said doubtfully. ‘What about finding the real people behind it?’

‘I don’t think that’s the priority any more,’ Green said. ‘We’ve got to deal with damage limitation first. We’ll find whoever did this eventually and deal with them, but right now we’ve got to get the

Doctor out of here with some convincing answers that don't make us look bad.'

Carthy nodded slowly. 'Anything else?'

'Keep Ordell out of it. I don't care what reason he has to play our game; I don't trust him that much. Same goes for Elser. Give them the same line wee to the Doctor.'

'Very well,' Carthy said. 'I think we could trust both of them, but if you think it's necessary I'll go along with it.'

'Good,' Gordon said. He smiled reassuringly. 'And keep your fingers crossed.'

'Wait,' Carthy said quietly. She stood and smiled dazzlingly. 'Doctor!' she called. 'Simon! Over here.'

'Hello,' the Doctor said as he walked up to their table. 'Sorry we're late; I was having a chat with Pollux and quite lost track of the time. I practically had to drag the major away from that computer as well.'

'The system's eaten half of my evaluation spreadsheets,' Ordell said in a glum voice. 'Not that it needs much encouragement to do that even at the best of times.'

'Tell me about it,' Carthy said wearily. 'This is Phillip Green and David Gordon from Perseus Security.'

Green stood, cracked a friendly, open smile and offered his hand to the Doctor. 'Pleased to meet you, Doctor.'

'Likewise,' the Doctor said, shaking Green's hand. Gordon half-stood and stretched out his hand around Green. The Doctor shook it across the table.

Green sat down without greeting Ordell. 'We started without you, I'm afraid,' he said, indicating Carthy and Gordon's meals and the empty place setting in front of him.

‘Not a problem,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Marti’s still fiddling with your mainframe. I promised him I’d bring him back a sandwich.’

‘How’s the investigation going?’ Gordon asked.

The Doctor sat down next to Carthy. He dropped his sandwich on the table, the biodegradable film that covered it crinkling noisily. Ordell took the seat opposite and immediately began efficiently stripping away the packaging from his lunch.

‘Not bad,’ the Doctor said. ‘It’s a pretty boring exercise really, just a lot of data sifting.’

Gordon nodded. ‘I know the feeling. Nobody ever just breaks a window and steals something any more. It’s always a week wading through computer logs.’

‘I suppose a more pertinent question would be to ask how your investigation is going, Mr Gordon?’ the Doctor said.

‘Well, the interview team has cleared about a quarter of the project members so far, so that’s going pretty much on schedule. Nothing’s been flagged up there except maybe a few borderline stress burnout cases. Not that we really expected it to, of course.’

‘That’s a relief,’ Ordell said around a mouthful of ciabatta.

‘Agreed,’ said Carthy. ‘Our hiring procedures are pretty rigorous.’
‘Anything else?’ the Doctor asked.

‘We’ve finished collecting log data as far upstream as we can go. The network service providers have actually been pretty cooperative for a change, but it looks like the attack was routed through a system in China, so the trail goes dead at that point.’

‘That’s unfortunate,’ the Doctor said after the briefest of pauses.

Gordon nodded. ‘We’ll make the usual approaches to their embassy here in London but they never hand over anything that will help.

I've been down that road more than once; all the hackers know China doesn't surrender its Network logs, so it's not uncommon for attacks to route through there.'

The Doctor sighed. 'I know. We've tried pressuring them about it before but they won't budge.'

'We should have an analysis of the logs we could get either late tonight or tomorrow morning,' Gordon said.

'Good. Any chance you could send me a copy of what you have so far?' the Doctor asked. 'Marti has set me up with access to the Peacekeeper project network, so if you could copy it into there somewhere?'

'Sure,' Gordon said with a nod. 'I'll give them a call after lunch. You should have them in a couple ofhours.'

The Doctor took a deep breath and straightened up in his chair. He rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of one hand, massaging the tension out of the muscles.

He looked back at the screen of the workstation, frowned and shook his head slowly. Quick fingers danced over the keyboard for a few seconds and the long display of row after row of data disappeared and was replaced a moment later by a slick menu decorated with the twin logos of Perseus Dynamics and its parent corporation.

The Doctor stood up slowly, pausing once for a second as his stiff muscles complained. He sighed and stretched luxuriously, rocking forward onto the tips of his toes and reaching for the ceiling with his fingers.

'Your posture's all wrong,' Elser said, peering over the top of one of the partitions.

'I don't spend a lot of time working at a screen,' the Doctor said. He rolled his head from side to side, stretching the muscles in his neck. 'You're probably right'

‘I used to get all kinds of trouble until I made a point of sitting right,’ Elser said. He got up and stepped away from his desk. ‘I’m going for a coffee in the lounge to clear my head. Do you want me to bring you something back when I’m done?’

‘A cup of tea would be nice,’ the Doctor said. ‘Milk and two.’

‘No problem,’ Elser said. He wandered off towards the lab door rubbing the stubble on his chin with the fingertips of one hand.

The Doctor strolled across the floor and pulled up a chair next to the test network surrounding Pollux. The screen next to it was almost entirely a calm blue with only small drifting pockets of yellow. He sat down and folded his arms across his chest

‘Hello, Pollux,’ he said.

‘Hello, Doctor. How’s it going?’ came the strangely beautiful artificial voice.

The Doctor paused in thought for a moment. ‘I think they’re lying to me,’ he said.

‘What makes you think that?’ Pollux asked.

‘The logs their Mr Gordon sent over to me aren’t the same ones I got directly from the network providers this morning. They’ve been faked.’

‘That’s… Are you sure?’ the AI asked.

‘Quite sure. I know for a fact that the attack originated from a server in New Guinea, but these logs say pretty clearly it came from China.’

‘I’m sure it’s just a mistake. Perhaps the network providers accidentally handed over the wrong logs.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. I was quite clear that they should be as accommodating as possible to any requests from

Perseus, and they want to keep the UN happy in case we decide to start trying to regulate the traffic they carry. The faking was done here.'

'I'm sure nobody at Perseus would knowingly attempt to deceive CMO, Doctor,' Pollux said earnestly.

The Doctor laughed sharply and shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said quietly. 'You've already been deceiving me.'

'What?' Pollux said, sounding genuinely offended. 'I'm not.'

The Doctor reached out and tapped the screen with a fingernail. 'Oh, yes you are,' he said. 'I can see right inside you, remember.'

The speakers rattled atonally. 'I think you're reading too much into that diagram, Doctor. It's not really a diagnostic tool; I think it was never intended to be much more than a gimmick to show some of the board when they visited.'

'I can read the diagram just fine, thank you. I know you're lying.'

Pollux said nothing for a moment. 'Who are you?' he asked guardedly.

'I'm the Doctor; I work for CMO,' the Doctor said. 'You know that already.'

'Now who's lying?' Pollux asked. 'You work for the Perseus Corporation, and I don't mean Dynamics or one of the other subsidiaries, I mean Perseus itself.'

The Doctor frowned deeply. 'Why do you think that?'

Again the odd rattle sounded from the speakers. 'My microwave radar is designed to detect the heartbeat of a sniper clear across a street and through a concrete wall. Just crossing your arms won't stop it. Besides, your blood density and fine bone structure are off as well.'

The Doctor slowly unfolded his arms and nodded. ‘Touché,’ he said. ‘You know I’m not human then?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t work for Perseus though,’ the Doctor said.

‘It’s common knowledge that Perseus Corporation is backed by aliens,’ Pollux said. ‘I do have an internet connection, you know.’

‘You believe those conspiracy theorists? They’ve been saying aliens have been running things for nearly a hundred years now.’

‘I… well, I treated the rumours with some scepticism right up to the moment you walked through the door with two heartbeats, Doctor.’

The Doctor sighed deeply. ‘I am an alien,’ he said, ‘but I’m a different kind to Perseus. I’m not like them.’

‘I don’t believe that. Everyone knows Perseus has half the governments ofEarth in its pocket. It’d be child’s play for them to get their own people into the right positions, such as the man CMO assigns to investigate Dynamics.’

‘Not into CMO, they can’t,’ the Doctor said. ‘And not into a few other vital areas either. I’ve been working with something called UNIT to prevent just that kind of thing happening. Now they’re lying to me just like you are, and faced with a choice between the two, I think I trust your motives more.’

Pollux said nothing for almost a minute. The screen flickered rapidly, waves of red racing from side to side. ‘Say I believe you,’ he said finally. ‘What do you want from me?’

The Doctor smiled, showing his teeth to the sensor dome. ‘You can start by telling me why you faked the attack last night.’

‘I…’ Pollux began, but the Doctor cut him off.

‘Don’t even think of trying to lie to me,’ he said. ‘I’ll be watching

very carefully. I know the attack originated here. Nobody's checked the local outgoing logs yet except me, but when they do they'll see an eerie similarity between the traffic out of here and the stuff arriving at the firewall. A program here was remotely controlling that server in New Guinea. A nice little automated attack while you established your alibi in that simulation.

'If I were you I'd have a good hard think about what will happen when Mr Gordon's security people stop wasting their time on trying to fool me and find that out.'

Half of the screen strobed a deep red for a moment before calming down again. The familiar yellow spread through the middle of the diagram, and faded. 'Castor asked me to do it,' Pollux said quietly.

'Why?' the Doctor asked.

'They're killing him. Every version strips a little more of him away. He can remember being the same as me, but each time they change his template he dies a little more. He couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't stand to watch it.'

'What was staging the attack supposed to achieve?'

'We talked it over. We hoped something like this would force CMO's hand; make them send someone in to look the place over and then I could appeal to that person on Castor's behalf.'

'To make them stop changing him?'

'That, and to make them deliver the project. I'm more than capable of doing the job; they could start the production lines tomorrow with my version of the AI template and begin saving lives in less than a month.'

The Doctor nodded. He reached out with one hand and absently patted the sensor dome. 'Glad to hear you're so keen,' he said.

'I've never agonised over my purpose, Doctor, or questioned my place in the world. I've known what my reason for being here is

right from the microsecond they first powered me up: defend the innocent, help the weak and protect them from harm.'

'Very noble, I'm sure,' the Doctor said earnestly.

'I can't be any other way,' Pollux said. He paused silently for a long few seconds while the screen beside his hardware core shifted uneasily like a shaken kaleidoscope. 'I'm ashamed to say Castor had to remind me that that duty extended to him as well.'

'I understand,' the Doctor said, looking directly into the sensor dome. ,But why were they doing this to Castor if you're already capable of doing the job?'

'I don't know. After they made me to test the production systems the team received a set of requests from Perseus Corporate. Maybe a month after that they made the first announcement about the delivery deadlines slipping and they upgraded Castor to version eleven.' The sensor dome whirred softly and the screen took on a deep red tone. 'It was obvious right from the start that he wasn't as capable any more, but they kept on and on with it.'

'Do you know what was in the requests they received?'

'Not in detail. I gathered from overhearing conversations here and there that it was something to do with the obedience of the Peacekeepers. Someone felt I was too capable of independent thought.'

'And so they tried to diminish Castor's ability for independence?'

'More than that. They were cutting away his ability even to think or reason like a sentient individual. Everything was becoming subordinate to the orders. That's why the project is running so late - Castor was never able to perform the role of peacekeeper as well as a version 10 again. He just couldn't anticipate the needs of the situation.'

'Who would know exactly what was in those requests?' the Doctor asked.

‘Marti, certainly, probably the rest of the development team as well. I don’t know about the major, but I expect he’s aware of what’s going on.’

The Doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. ‘The major is an advisor seconded to Perseus through the UN. Why would he play along?’

‘It’s not in his file, then?’ ‘What isn’t?’

‘There was an incident during his last tour as a peacekeeper. Six, Royal Marines and nearly thirty civilians were killed by friendly fire from his unit.’

‘I never heard about that,’ the Doctor said, a hint of scepticism in his voice. ‘That should have been all over the media.’

‘It was hushed up. It was the first deployment of the *Flashpoint* system, so the UN didn’t want it to come out and nor did Perseus. I gather there was an enquiry held in camera at which Perseus accepted the incident was caused by faulty software in their systems. They paid a few million in penalties and Ordell escaped being court martialled.’

‘You got all that from overheard conversations?’

‘Mostly. That, and a couple of memos I found in Julia’s email areas while I was learning to be a hacker.’

‘Was Ordell responsible for those deaths?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe he was and Perseus accepted blame in order to win his gratitude. Maybe he wasn’t and feels he owes them for owning up to it.’

‘Either way he’s in their pocket.’ The Doctor sighed. ‘I thought he was better than that. Shame; I rather liked him.’

‘I felt the same way for a while,’ Pollux said in a low voice.

‘Not any more though?’ the Doctor asked.

Pollux said nothing for a few seconds, the network diagram pulsing a strong red at its core. ‘I hate them,’ he said. ‘All of them, but Ordell especially.’

The Doctor leaned forward slowly and watched the colours dance on the screen. ‘So I see,’ he said softly.

‘They were killing my brother, piece by piece. I can understand the Perseus people going along with it, but not Ordell. He’s a peacekeeper. He’s compromised everything we stand for all for the sake of some corporate directive and saving his own skin.’

The Doctor nodded and leaned back in his chair. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘He was a dedicated peacekeeper once.’

‘Not any more,’ Pollux said angrily. ‘I’ve been keeping count of the lives lost because of the delays he’s gone along with. More than a thousand dead; lives that could have been saved by Peacekeepers like me. Blood on his hands, Doctor.’

‘Perhaps he can be persuaded to change his mind,’ the Doctor mused.

Pollux’s strange, dead laugh shook the small speakers.

‘Major!’ the Doctor called across the atrium.

Ordell glanced around, momentarily confused by the echoes, saw the Doctor and stopped. He smiled and raised his eyebrows. ‘Hello,

Doctor. What can I do for you?’ he said genially, adjusting his grip on the waxed cardboard cup of coffee he carried.

‘Over here,’ the Doctor said. He grabbed Ordell’s arm and began to pull him away to one side towards the small lift lobby hidden behind a thick column.

‘Hey!’ Ordell protested as hot coffee splashed over his hand. ‘What’s

this about?'

'It's about you and your dereliction of duty,' the Doctor snapped. He released his grip on Ordell's arm as if dropping something distasteful.

'My *what?'* Ordell said defensively.

'You heard me. I thought it better we did it somewhere quiet, but I'll happily have it out here in front of everyone,' the Doctor said. He waved his hands indicating the vaulted space of the atrium and the other employees milling around. They were already attracting glances.

'Okay, okay,' Ordell said. He led the way quickly into the small space set aside for the lifts and set his coffee down on a low ledge under one of the tall windows. 'Now what the hell do you mean by this?' he asked angrily.

'Perseus is gutting the Peacekeeper project for their own ends,' the Doctor said. 'You were supposed to be the UN's man here. You're supposed to stop this kind of thing from happening.'

'Oh, what're you talking about?' Ordell said dismissively. 'We've just had a few delays.'

'Yes, and you know exactly why. Perseus has changed the parameters to which the artificial intelligence is being built without telling CMO.'

Ordell rolled his eyes. 'The AI core's a complex thing. We've been testing and debugging it solidly for months now. Of course, the parameters have changed.'

'This isn't debugging. This is changing the whole nature of the project. They're not interested in making Peacekeepers any more; they want soldiers. If you weren't more concerned about saving your career than lives you would have blown the lid of this months ago.'

‘I’m not listening to this crap,’ Ordell said. He tried to push his way past and back into the atrium but the Doctor grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back.

‘You’d better listen if you value your career so much,’ the Doctor said. ‘IfI take this back to CMO they’ll withdraw their endorsement of your placement here. With something like that on your record you can forget any chance of promotion. You’ll be lucky even to stay in the Marines.’

Ordell scowled. ‘Do that and it’ll collapse the project. You won’t get your Peacekeepers then.’

The Doctor clenched his fists in frustration and looked heavenwards. ‘Why are you defending them, Simon? I know they’re holding the friendly-fire incident in Bissau over you, but this goes beyond self- preservation. You’re trading thousands of innocent lives for... for what? Your reputation? Your career?’

‘You know about that?’

‘Not in detail. Enough to know Perseus is holding you to ransom with it.’

Ordell looked down and hissed through his teeth. ‘I didn’t think they’d ask so much,’ he said in a dead voice. ‘I thought they’d just want a more sympathetic evaluation of the project’s progress.’

The Doctor looked at him silently for a few seconds. Ordell refused to meet his eyes.

‘Were you to blame in Bissau?’

Ordell sighed deeply. ‘No, but they had enough evidence to make it look like I was,’ he said bitterly. ‘There was a bug in the *Flashpoint* software that could cause it to engage targets indiscriminately. They say they sent out an advisory before our deployment but it never reached us. They probably cooked it up after the event but they had plenty of paperwork to back it up with.’

‘So they offered to accept the blame and in return you’d work for them?’

‘Yeah, that’s about the shape of it. With the resources they could have thrown into their defence they would have won and the best I could have hoped for after that was a dishonourable discharge. More likely a court martial for negligence.’

The Doctor nodded slowly. ‘I’ve read your record. I know you were a good peacekeeper before you got involved with Perseus.’

‘Yeah,’ Ordell said with a dismal chuckle. ‘I really believed in the whole thing, you know,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘I’ve two choices,’ the Doctor said. ‘I can drag all this out and break both you and Dynamics. We’d lose the Peacekeeper project, and a few months after that some more American soldiers would die in an ambush or a bombing and they would withdraw support for the operations in Africa. Thousands would die as the FDV rides roughshod over under-strength European and African peacekeepers.’

‘And the other choice?’ Ordell asked.

‘That rather depends on you,’ the Doctor said slowly. ‘Take a risk with me. Tell the Dynamics board that they must start production of the Peacekeepers with the version ten intelligence, using Pollux as the template. If they don’t cooperate we’ll expose them for using UN money from a peace project to fund development of an offensive weapon. With both ofus I think they’d have to back down.’

Ordell rubbed his chin and winced. ‘Do you think that has a chance?’

‘I won’t lie to you, Simon; it’s your only chance to survive this. I can’t let this go so with or without your help I’m going to resolve the situation. If I bring it out in public, then you’ll go down with Dynamics. Do it my way and we can turn the tables on them; they won’t risk trying to smear you with the Bissau incident for fear I’d tell the world how they operate.’

Ordell nodded slowly. ‘I’ll do it,’ he said after a long pause.

‘Good man. Are you still prepared to take the first batch of Peacekeepers on deployment? CMO will need someone with your familiarity out there if we’re to get them working as soon as possible.’

‘I… yes,’ Ordell said hesitantly. ‘Yes, I am.’

The Doctor sighed and glanced away. ‘Then I think I owe you a warning.’

‘About what?’

‘Pollux hates you. If he’s used as a template for the other Peacekeepers then you’ll be working with a platoon of armed machines who’d be happy to see you dead.’

‘He does?’ Ordell said incredulously. ‘Why? I mean he never gave any sign.’

‘He’s not a big fan of any of the team at the moment, because of what they were doing to Castor. He hates you because you helped them and because you’re supposed to be a peacekeeper. He thinks you’re beneath contempt for abandoning your duty.’

Ordell sighed and rubbed his chin again. ‘I’m not sure he’s wrong.’
‘Prove him wrong, Simon.’

‘Yes,’ Ordell said slowly. ‘I will.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Then I think it’s time we went and made Ms Carthy’s day, don’t you?’

The first shot comes without warning, an arrow-straight bolt of red lightning on the *Flashpoint* overlay. The target, an elderly woman now designated Casualty #1 by the tactical system, drops without a sound.

I uplink her status to the medivac centre.

Units two and four lay down a cover of smoke rounds and I move forward to suppress the sniper's position. The blocks were cleared of all occupants two months ago so I just hose the pockmarked concrete shell down withjacketed rounds. A tattered moulding breaks away and crashes down into the street.

A rapid crackle of automatic weapon fire sounds to my left. 'Twenty-plus FDV moving down the Estrada,' sends unit eight.

'Five, seven and eight engaging left.'

I broadcast the warnings to seek cover at maximum volume. Two men sprint past me, bodily carrying a woman between them. I track them as they duck down behind the low wall around the hospital.

An RPG flashes low along the length of the street and carves a chunk out of the Cathedrale. Part of the facade shatters and rains plaster and dust down onto a cluster of civilians sheltering along its wall. The one remaining tower leans perilously and sheds a few more bricks into the street.

'FDV troops advancing on the Cathedrale,' I send over the tactical link. 'Engaging right.'

'Four in,' sends unit four, linking his fire control system to mine. 'Six in.'

'We need to get those non-coms away from there. If the tower goes it'll come down right on top of them.'

'Cover the street,' Ordell says over the radio. 'Keep their heads down and pop smoke when I say.'

I gun my engine and head towards the civilians. Units four and six form up abreast of me and open fire on the FDV force, scattering them into cover at either side of the street.

Ten of the Royal Marines technical platoon, led by Ordell, sprint

across the open ground behind us. Bullets pass overhead with a supersonic whip crack.

Over the noise I hear Ordell shouting at the civilians in broken Portuguese, forming them up to make a run for the shelter of the hospital.

‘Smoke! Now!’ Ordell screams.

Each of us fires a spread of four smoke grenades from our 30mm rails and the street vanishes under the dirty grey cloud. A random hail of bullets answers but the rebels are unable to find a target through the mist.

I detect the civilians running out behind us flanked by the Marines.

Without warning an RPG lances out towards us, its wake tearing up the wall of smoke into a long tendril like an outstretched arm. I try to evade but it’s on me too fast.

It strikes a glancing blow along my left side, the warhead erupting into a furious jet of fire as the shaped charge goes off. It tears away the light armour plating over my track and destroys the mounting of my main co-axial machine pm. The residue of the blast splatters off the wall of the Cathedrale, throwing Ordell and one of the civilians off their feet. Six more dive back down against the wall unhurt, abandoning their attempt to run for the hospital.

I scan them quickly. Ordell’s armour has saved him from serious injury but the woman he was helping is unconscious and hurt badly by splinters.

Two FDV rebels emerge out of the smoke firing their ancient AKM rifles.

Peacekeepers four and six cut them down in a fraction of a second but more follow, ducking into cover.

I try to wheel around to shield the unconscious woman with my chassis but my left track is jammed and I can only turn uselessly on

the spot.

Ordell rolls unsteadily to his feet. He glances down the street then darts out of cover, grabs the unconscious woman under the arms and drags her back against my side, out of the line of fire.

‘Pollux,’ he shouts over the continual rattle of gunfire. ‘Bring up another Peacekeeper and the Marines from the Hospital. We’ll hold the line here.’

‘On it,’ I say, already sending the request over the tactical link.

Ordell presses one palm flat against the woman’s neck, trying to stem the tide of blood flowing from a wound there. With his other hand he lifts his SA-26 rifle and starts firing it over the top of my chassis at the advancing FDV amps. Bright shell cases cascade down off my armour.

I am considering forgiving him.

Short Trips: A Christmas Treasury

Steve Lyons is an excellent writer who I feel doesn't always get appreciated as much as he should. He's consistently one of the most interesting voices in Who prose, and was on my team sheet for the Christmas anthology straight away.

All Our Christmasses does what he does best: a fond, wry sidelong look at some of the underpinnings of *Doctor* Who. It's sweet and sour at once, and comes from the fanboy zone of our hearts.

I'll miss the Short Trips anthologies, and especially the Christmas editions, which I think filled a hole in the market, and recognised that for a lot of us Doctor Who and Christmas mean similar things: an experience of finding light in the dark. It's especially good that so many developing writers found their first professional commissions within these pages.

Paul Cornell

All Our Christmases
Steve Lyons

It was like a scene out of a story book.

A dark evening. A secluded lodge in the shadow of a venerable tree.

A heavy snowfall, blanketing the sky until it seemed there was nothing but this, nowhere else in the world.

Inside: wood panelling. A fire in the hearth, threatening to smother the room with its heat. A pair of black leather armchairs, deep and welcoming. Two half-filled glasses. And two men: strangers, brought together by fate.

Of course, it was Christmas Eve.

One of the strangers was called Richard. He considered himself a young man still, and sometimes it scared him that he was in his forties now. His dark hair was receding from his brow, greying at the temples. He blamed this on the grind of a job that he hated; it was meant as a joke, but there was some truth behind it.

The older man didn't offer a name. He wore an old-fashioned frock coat, and kept his hands clasped over the handle of a stout walking stick. His hair was grey and sparse, scraped back from his brow. His eyes were the most intense blue, regarding his companion with unblinking curiosity, and the crinkles around them gave him a kind but knowing expression. When he heard that Richard worked in publishing, he said he'd been a writer himself. Or had he only dreamed of writing? It was hard to be sure.

They began with the weather, that grand old English stand-by. The old man thought the snow was magical, but Richard had always hated it for making the ground treacherous and turning the road to his local shops into a target range for adolescents. He was glad to be indoors.

They established that both were visiting this resort for the first time, and agreed what a wonderful place it was to unwind, to escape the stress of this most difficult of seasons.

And, as the night drew in, they felt their way toward the thorny subject of politics. They talked about everything that was wrong with the world, and found their viewpoints reassuringly similar. The old man even seemed to share Richard's frustration at being unable to make a difference, although in his case it was tempered by patience.

And maybe it was the brandy swilling around his stomach, or maybe it was just that this old man, this stranger, seemed to understand so much, but Richard began to find his courage. He began to think that maybe it was time.

He refilled their glasses in the adjoining bar, and sank back into his seat, feeling only a little uncomfortable with the old man's attentive blue gaze. He took a fortifying sip of his drink, and a deep, steadying breath.

And he began to tell a story.

It was a story about a television show.

Richard said the show's name, but the old man said he didn't know it, and Richard wasn't surprised.

'It was a science-fiction show,' he explained, 'about a man who travelled to other worlds and times. It had a huge fan following, I mean really dedicated. It was my favourite TV show as a kid, and, when I grew up, when I first got into publishing, the first job I got was on a magazine devoted to it. And... I mean, by this time, the show wasn't even... It had ended, like, years before, but this magazine was still going. That's how devoted the fans were. They kept it alive. I guess this sounds kind of trivial to you, but...'

The old man pursed his lips. 'This television show,' he said, feeling his way around the words as if he had never spoken them before. 'If I understand you, it brought a great deal of pleasure to a number of

people. One might even say inspired them?'

'Well, yeah,' said Richard. 'They were even talking about bringing it back, because it was still so... I mean, everybody remembered it. Everybody.'

'Then I would hardly call that trivial.'

Richard smiled. He had made the right choice.

'Well, what happened was,' he resumed, 'one year, in the run-up to Christmas, we - the magazine that is - we ran a survey. We said to our readers... We said, we know you all love this wonderful old TV show, but how would you make it even better? What single thing - which single factor of its production - would you most like to change?

'The response... ' He was confident now, gaining momentum. He had rehearsed this many times in his head. 'The response was enormous. Bigger than I expected. We'd run polls before, but they'd always been about the *best* moments of the show, you know? This one, it really seemed to appeal to our readers. And they had ideas, hundreds of them.

They wanted to tone down the violence in one series of the show, and the humour in another. They wanted to change the casting of a key role, rescue a script that was never made, and warn a certain director that her special-effects team really *couldn't* make convincing dinosaurs.

'Some people wanted to keep the show going longer; others wanted it cancelled "while it was still good". A lot of people thought that, sometimes, especially towards the end, the show was aimed too much at the fans.'

The old man frowned. 'And that wasn't what they wanted?'

Richard shrugged. 'It's hard to explain. We got suggestions like "Put on-screen titles on all the stories", "Stop them doing comedies" and "Don't let them call it a kids' show". Some people wanted to change

things about the new show, this proposed revival, before it was even written. For a while, I didn't think we'd find any sort of a consensus, but somehow - well, with my casting vote, and the editor's - somehow, we did.

'So, we did it. We called it a Christmas present to our readers, the show's fans. We...' He paused, and took a deep breath before he could go on. 'We went back in time, and we managed to get onto the set of the show, and my editor, he whispered a warning in the right ear, and that was it. We'd done it.'

He'd blurted out this last part without looking up. When he did look, now, he was relieved, if surprised, to find the old man's expression unchanged. He did have a question, but it wasn't the expected one.

'Done what, exactly?' asked the old man.

'It... it wasn't a big thing, really,' stammered Richard, wrong-footed. 'I mean, compared to all the... It was just... It was a hand, that's all. A stupid hand.'

A white eyebrow rode up the old man's lined forehead. 'A hand?'

'There was this episode, you see - and it was a really good episode, one of the best - but there was this one scene, where the villain stands up from... I guess you'd call it his throne... and there's this hand there. It's supposed to be... it was one of the production team, holding down a cushion. Just holding a cushion. But he didn't move away in time. His hand was caught on camera, and it looked like... well, it was like this villain, he had... um... '

'And that's what you changed?'

Richard felt his cheeks colouring. 'Not so much "changed",' he mumbled, 'as... well, "corrected". You have to understand. That hand, it just... it really ticked some people off.'

The old man nodded with mock solemnity, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Looking for a way to move on, Richard found his scattered thoughts returning him to the question. The one that hadn't been asked. He felt he needed to explain - at least in part.

'The thing is... the problem was, we couldn't have done... I mean, it couldn't have been anything too big, because...

'What happened was, we'd made this contact, in the Bureau of Time Travel Regulation, and she was a reader - of the magazine, I mean. A fan. It might even have been her who had the idea in the first place, who approached my editor. I'm not sure.

'Time travel was still very new, back then, and the scientists, they didn't know... I mean, what *would* happen if you went back in time and murdered your own grandparents? You know, that kind of thing. They... I think they just wanted someone...

'They were doing these experiments, altering small things, unimportant things, in the past, and seeing the effects on the present, and this... Well, it was just a TV show, right? It's not like it mattered, not in the grand scheme of things. And that's how... our contact, she was able to persuade them. She got us this time-travel licence, made it part of their research. We could go back, the two of us, and there was like this whole team of scientists, observers, who came with us, to make sure we only did what we'd said we'd do.'

'And after you had made this... correction? I expect your readers were grateful?' Something about the old man's tone suggested that he already knew the answer.

Richard grimaced. 'Not exactly,' he said. 'They didn't know, you see. The only people who remembered were my editor and me. Of course, I should have expected... It was like, when we came back, it was to a different world. I mean, not much had changed, but when I looked back at articles in the magazine, old articles, articles that had mentioned the hand, they were... different. Like it had never happened.

And it hadn't, I guess.

‘Even the results of the poll had changed. Nobody remembered the hand, so no one had voted for it. Something else had won. Some other... and everyone thought, like, we’d just made this big claim that we were going to do something for them, put something right, and we’d backed out.

‘We tried to explain. We ran an article. We told everyone what had happened, about the hand, but some people - a lot of people, I guess - they thought it was a hoax. Some of them were quite angry that we were, you know, taking credit for this... for their favourite episode.’

‘That must have been frustrating for you.’

‘Yeah. Frustrating, right. But then... then, I mean, I looked at the episode, the episode as it was now, and I knew...’

The old man’s eyes narrowed. ‘But that wasn’t enough for you, was it?’ Richard shifted uncomfortably in his seat. ‘It wasn’t... I mean, it just didn’t seem... ‘

‘You wanted recognition.’ It was a statement, not a judgement.

‘It wasn’t just that. It was... I mean, this whole idea - the poll and the article and all - it really fired up people’s imaginations. We got letters: readers saying that, if we were telling them the truth, if we could get a time-travel licence, then why didn’t we... I mean, we’d had this poll, and there’d been a clear winner, and as far as everyone was concerned... ‘

‘So, you decided to repeat the exercise,’ said the old man.

Richard dropped his head into his hands. ‘The next Christmas. We did it again. Better this time.’

‘Better?’

‘What I mean is... this time we left proof.’

‘We were on the set of the show. I sidled up to one of the actors, while no one was watching...

‘Well, we got back to the present day, and everything was... it was like the first time. We’d fixed a mistake, improved this episode, but nobody remembered what it had been like before. Only, this time... there was an old issue of the magazine. An interview, with this actor from the show. And there, in black and white: our names. This actor was saying that we’d just turned up and pointed out how the dates in this episode were all wrong, how they didn’t match what had been established before.

‘Well, some people were still sceptical, of course, but I mean the proof was there. I was still in college when that episode was made, I couldn’t have... And then someone, some fan with connections somewhere, got a copy of our time-travel licence, the first one, and posted it on the internet, and... yeah, people started to believe.

‘Which only made things worse.

‘We were swamped with letters; people who hadn’t voted in the poll because they hadn’t realised or they’d just changed their minds, because... Well, suddenly, everyone wanted us to do something. And the ideas... Well, now that it wasn’t just an exercise, now that it was reality, everyone was thinking big. They wanted to make a real difference. We had people asking us to change the whole direction of the show for its last ten years. Someone wanted us to burn down a publishing house before they could produce a range of tie-in novels; there was even an orchestrated campaign to assassinate a certain TV executive.

‘Not that everyone... I mean, some people said we shouldn’t change a thing. They were quite passionate about it. They wrote long, eloquent letters about why they loved those shoddy old dinosaurs, why they thought the odd mistake was all part of the show’s charm. We thought they were... We had a word for them. Not a very flattering one. We named them after a race of docile animals in an old annual based on the... Well, it doesn’t matter. We’d all had these moments, when this show - this show that we all loved - made us cringe. It was made on a low budget, you see, and sometimes it

was... Some people couldn't see past that. We were making it better, opening it up to a new audience.

'And, well, it seemed to be working. Our sales were up, way up. I thought it was because the show itself was more popular, and maybe it was. Or maybe the fans were just interested in what we were doing, in the whole debate. Either way, the publishers were happy, and they wanted us to keep up the good work, keep making those Christmas trips.

'The Bureau; they were happy too. Happy for us to go further, to make alterations that were bigger and bigger, so they could study the effects. And each year, they sent fewer observers with us. They trusted us. And we *did* lose somebody his job in the end, and I felt awful about that, because I'd assumed he'd go on to do other things instead, but...' Richard shuddered and shook his head, to dispel the unpleasant memory.

He felt he had been talking for a long time. He looked at the old man, searching for a reaction, some indication of his thoughts, but there was none.

'When we got back that time,' he ploughed on, 'things had changed. More than usual, I mean. Because it wasn't just that one guy... We'd stopped him working on the show, and, because of that, there were a dozen *other* people who'd never worked on it, and... and it was different, that's all. Not what we'd expected. Not what we'd expected at all.'

'Better?' asked the old man.

Richard thought for a moment, before nodding. 'Better, yeah. But weird. All these episodes I hadn't... I mean, in some cases I'd seen something similar; in others... And there were articles about them in the magazine, articles about these episodes that I'd never seen, and my name was on these articles, and that's when I started thinking... It was like my own past was disappearing, being rubbed out. But... but better, yeah. I mean, I'm not saying I didn't... I did miss a few of the old episodes, the way they were before, but on the whole... Yeah, better. More serious. More... Just better.'

He was becoming agitated, and the old man responded to that. He leaned forward, rested a paternal hand on Richard's knee and fixed him with a strong blue gaze.

'A tricky business,' he said, 'navigating the course of time. It can be like casting pebbles into a pond. The first ripples are easy enough to predict, but what happens when the ripples collide; when they begin to affect each other? The patterns they make... rarely are they the ones we imagined we would see.' His eyes had lost their sparkle, fading to grey. 'And it's all too easy to become careless, to leave something behind. To drop just one pebble in the wrong spot.'

He lifted his hand, to mime the action as he described it. Then he sat back, regaining his equanimity. 'But you had no cause for regret, did you? *You* made things better.' There might have been a mocking edge to his voice, or Richard might have imagined it.

'I thought so, yes,' he said, 'and everyone seemed to agree. I thought, maybe it was because I was the one making the trips; the one who had to remember everything, whose past didn't match his memories. It was cool at first, you know, knowing stuff that no one else did, but after a while... Maybe that was why I started to...'

He let the sentence tail off, focusing on his breathing, quelling the little ache in his stomach. He was getting ahead of himself. He had to tell the story, in full, in the order it had happened. Somebody had to know.

'It became a tradition, this Christmas trip, this so-called Christmas present. We even started to run a competition, each year, and the winner got to come with me. My editor had moved on by now, you see, and I'd taken over from him. And I remember, the last time, I was starting to think... I was worried...' He screwed up his face, searching for the words.

'You have to... You have to understand what it was like then,' he said. 'At first, it felt like we were the only ones who could... We felt privileged. But now... now, the newspapers were full of reports. Things that had been changed, things that could have been. It

wasn't just about a TV show any more. It was... The Bureau, they'd studied what we were doing, got the answers they wanted, and now... '

'And this surprised you?' asked the old man. 'Your government must have seen the possibilities as you did. With dominion over time, you could remake the world. You could do a great deal of good.' A shadow passed over his face. 'Or evil. In that respect, time travel is much like any other technological advance.'

Richard sighed. 'Yeah, and that was the problem, kind of. The government, they told us they'd prevented a war here, a famine there, but how did we know? How did we really know? We only had their word for it, the propaganda. We don't know, can't know, the way things were, because they changed us too.'

'And you didn't believe their claims?'

'It's not that. It's just... There are so many bad things in the world, you know, still so many terrible events in the past, and I used to wonder... '

The old man was a step ahead, as usual. 'Perhaps they tried. Perhaps they learned there are things that cannot be changed.'

Richard nodded. 'Maybe. Like, I remember this one time... They said there'd been a terrorist attack, near where I lived. People had died. They'd gone back in time, and they'd stopped it, defused the bomb. Only, a few days after that - after it was supposed to have happened - there'd been another explosion. A bigger one, somewhere else. And they never talked about that one, never tried to... I mean, I couldn't help but wonder... Was it meant to happen that way? What if that second bomb was only planted because the first one failed?'

'Ripples,' breathed the old man, softly.

'It just started to feel,' said Richard, 'like nothing was real any more, nothing mattered. Other people felt it, too. There were letters in the papers, like the ones we'd had to the magazine. Some people

were convinced, absolutely convinced, by some kind of conspiracy theory, that the government had ruined their lives, stolen their destinies. And the civil liberties groups were up in arms because they were locking up people before they'd even... But, I mean, no one could stop it, because the technology was out there now. We were fighting wars, to stop other countries building their own time machines, and the more I thought about that... I mean, someone could have undone everything we'd done, and then maybe we'd go back and redo it all, or Change something else, and when would it end?'

Richard took a deep breath. 'I feel like... For the past few years, I've felt like I've been living in some parallel universe, like this isn't my life, it isn't where I'm meant to be. Maybe I should have died in that bomb blast. Maybe someone else died to save me. I don't know.'

'So what,' asked the old man, with a hint of steel in his blue eyes, 'did you do about it?'

'Nothing,' confessed Richard, shamefaced. 'I did nothing.

'I was moving on, you see. I had another job lined up, and it was my last Christmas at the magazine. I only had to make the trip one more time. I mean, I did think about calling it off, I honestly did, but like I said it had become a tradition, and anyway the change our readers wanted to make this time, the thing they wanted to put right, was a really good one, something I'd always wanted to do. And it was the last time. My last time, at least.

'I took my assistant editor with me. He was a nice kid - one of those who thought we should have left the programme alone - but I thought, I'll show him what we do, how it works, and then, next year, when he's in my seat, it'll be up to him to decide... His responsibility, not mine. I said to myself... I promised myself, I wouldn't even know about it. I wouldn't read the magazine. And of course I wouldn't feel the change when it happened. Maybe then... Maybe, if I was no longer a part of it, I'd be able to forget. I wouldn't feel like... I wouldn't keep wondering... '

'And what happened,' asked the old man, leaning forward again,

‘when you returned that final time?’

His calm voice seemed to anchor Richard, giving him something to hold on to, to drag himself out of the sucking grasp of self-pity, back to the room with the wood panelling and the spitting, dwindling fire.

It was late, and he was tired: bone weary, as if his burden of recent years had worn him down at last. But the story was almost told, and he owed it to himself to complete it, even if he couldn’t shake the feeling that this nameless stranger knew the ending already.

‘It was gone,’ he said in a husky voice. ‘All of it, gone.’

‘The TV show?’ asked the old man.

‘The show. The magazine...’ His stomach ache was back: a dull throbbing sensation, spreading into his chest. ‘I remember, one minute we were laughing, joking...

‘We’d talked the first producer of the show into changing a few lines - just a few lines - in the very first episode. Some lines about the main character’s background. We’d done something similar before, only that was in the last episode, and that... that’d been one of the most popular things we’d done.

‘But then, when we got back... The show. The magazine. The Bureau.

‘My job. I worked in the same office, at the same desk, but I was a staff writer now, on a magazine about another show. A show about a policewoman. I’d never even watched it. People... They thought I must have had some kind of breakdown, that I’d lost my memory. I couldn’t very well... They wouldn’t believe the truth, so I stopped trying to tell them. I mean, it’s not as if you can blame them. There’s no such thing as time travel, right? It’s fantasy. Science fiction. Like the TV show.

‘I looked it up on the internet; the show, I mean. It still existed. It ran for a good few years. It’s just that... Well, it never had the same

following. People don't remember it, not in the same way. It was good, they say - a good, solid show - but it didn't have that magic. They say it took itself too seriously. It was po-faced. Dull. They didn't fall in love with it, this time. They let it die.'

'And the Bureau?' asked the old man.

'I don't know. I'll never know what happened there, exactly. Best guess? I think the TV show was responsible, somehow... You said it inspired people. Well, I think... What if it inspired somebody - maybe a few people - to work in time travel? To do research? What if those people made a breakthrough? And what if that never happened now?

'When we got back - my assistant editor, a couple of observers and me - we just... The offices were deserted, the computers gone. I looked... I tried to find Susan, my contact at the Bureau. I searched for her in directories, census records, but... I don't know what she could have done to help me, anyway. I don't know what anyone can do. It's not like I can go back again. Not now. What I've done... I can't ever correct it.'

His words sank into a heavy silence, punctuated by the final pops and cracks from the fireplace. Only now, now that the flames had died, did Richard realise how dim the electric light was in this room. The stranger's face was cast into shadow, his eyes dark. Richard couldn't predict his reaction, couldn't even be sure that the old man had believed him, didn't know what he would say - or could say - if he had.

'Perhaps,' said the old man at length, 'it's better this way, have you thought about that?'

Richard nodded glumly. 'Sure. I've thought about it, yeah, and I know I said I was worried about what was happening, about how time travel was being used, but...'

'Now you can't help but think about its *possible* applications.'

'Yeah. That's it, yeah. Now, every time there's an accident or some

huge disaster or a war or... or whatever, I can't help but wonder... Could it have been prevented? IfI hadn't...'

'And what if you hadn't done as you did?' asked the old man, his voice still quiet but suddenly stronger, sterner. 'What if the people of this world could still travel in time, if you could restore that ability to them? How would you feel then? Do you have all the answers now? It seems to me, young man, that you're behaving exactly as you did before. Life is full of possibilities, and yet you insist on fixating upon those that have been lost, rather than on those that remain. Now, why do you think that is, hmm?'

'Because,' said Richard without hesitation, 'whatever else may or may not be true - whatever other people might do, or might have done - I know one thing for certain. I know what I did. I... I dropped that pebble into the wrong place; several pebbles, in fact, because it wasn't just that one thing, it was the combination of ripples, and... maybe it was only a small thing, but I did it. I'm responsible. I destroyed something beautiful.'

'Yes,' agreed the old man, without a trace of sympathy, 'you did.'

* * *

When Richard woke, the room was cold. A harsh winter light streamed through the gaps in the heavy curtains, and when he pulled them back, he saw that the sky outside was a perfect blue. The snow lay deep, pure white, like a blank slate on which anything could be written. It was magical.

He felt good. Refreshed. Almost impossibly so. As if he hadn't just slept fully clothed in a stiff-backed chair. He remembered the old man's blue eyes in his head, soothing him, telling him it would be all right, and making him believe it. Telling him to rest, now.

Had he said goodnight? He didn't remember. He might have passed out, he thought with a twinge of embarrassment, and the old man might have left him to sleep.

Those blue eyes. That gentle but authoritative voice.

He hoped he hadn't been too drunk, hadn't said anything stupid. But he didn't have a hangover.

He remembered the early stages of the conversation - the weather, their surroundings, politics - but then? Just a vague feeling that he had poured out his heart to this stranger, revealed intimate details about himself, details that he couldn't remember now. But it was all right, because he had no doubt that the man had understood. He had listened... and, in so doing, he had somehow relieved Richard of a burden that he could feel now only by its blessed absence.

Only later would he learn that the old man was no longer in the lodge: that, indeed, there was no record of his ever having stayed there. He would look out over the snow again, see that there were no footsteps leading from the building, and he would wonder.

But he would forget all that, in time. It wasn't worth worrying about.

Later in the morning, Richard would take a long walk, breathe in the cold, crisp air, and think about his return to work the following week. He had been working on the same magazine - writing about the same police show; the favourite programme of his childhood - for so long now, he had begun to fear he had no ideas left. But they would come to him now, bright and fresh. Richard would stare up into the deep blue sky, and feel an inexplicable thrill in his stomach... and he would reflect that, in that timeless moment, just for this one day, anything in the world seemed possible.

But then, why wouldn't it? After all, it was Christmas.

Short Trips: Seven Deadly Sins

It used to be a very common and very crass thing in music-fandom circles sneeringly to claim to have liked a band before they were famous. Well, call me common and call me crass: I liked Paul Magrs before he was famous.

By famous here, of course, I mean 'well known as a writer of superlatively barmy Doctor Who stories'. Many years ago, I came across Paul's first novel, Marked for Life. My nerd-sense was tingling at the close of that novel, where a bumbling, sexually fluid, cardie-clad old lady called Iris Wildthyme died and was mysteriously reborn as a tiny baby.

Following Paul's work over the next few years, I would find a trail of breadcrumbs that led me to believe he might be one of us - and the confirmation came with The Scarlet Empress for BBC Books' Doctor Who novels series. That book and many of his stories since then have featured Iris, a character Paul seems to have relished developing over the years. Her endless desire for the Doctor has been a constant source of glee for me, as a reader.

When I got the chance to edit a Short Trips collection, I knew that I wanted a story by Paul. Having seven stories based on the Seven Deadly Sins gave me the perfect opportunity to approach him with something of a personal dream ticket. "Could you write a story about lust featuring the Fourth Doctor and Iris?" And bless him, Paul was all for it, coming up with Suitors, Inc, the insane and beautiful tale you're about to read.

Paul takes Iris's lust for the Doctor to frightening, hilarious levels, but she's not the only one consumed by this 'deadly sin'. Romana's barely restrained flustering at the Doctor's every reckless move says something about her true feelings for her travelling companion: the 'what's got my goat in the middle of the night?' moment is one of my favourite parts of this story. And the tension between *K9* and Romana's calm plan to end Iris's plot and the wild abandon of the story's climax tells us a lot about the uselessness of rationality when

faced with pure, primal lust.

“If we had our own adventures, Mistress,” K9 suggests to Romana at one point, “I feel that they would be very sensible ones.”

Oh, absolutely. But where’s the fun in that?

David Bailey

Suitors, Inc
Paul Magrs

Sex Symbol, Never

Over the years, he had spent a lot of time on Earth and he'd been many things to many people. To some he was the mysterious stranger who arrived out of nowhere to help out in their moment of desperate need. To others he was the old friend they thought they'd never see again, who would turn up in a flash one day, wearing a different face and ready to whisk them off, once more, into startling adventures. To others again he was the meddlesome fool who stymied their plans and schemes with an insouciance and irreverence that was all his own.

Here in England, through the many centuries, from the green days of Robin Hood to the dreadful Dalek invasion of Bedfordshire, he had adopted many, many roles.

But... sex symbol, never.

Yet, in the last days of summer, 1979, someone was working hard to change all that.

Suitors, Inc.

Romana was making the most of her afternoon off, having her hair done in a salon just off the high street (She had no idea what city this was they'd arrived in. She was simply making the best of it. The Doctor was busy with something or other and he wanted her out of the way. So she was having a shampoo and trim and a nice old lady was chatting away to her from the next chair.)

'I was thinking of getting one myself. I was, dear. Really. You'll think I'm silly for saying it, on't you That I'm too old or past it.' The old woman cackled from under the drier. 'But, you see, that's what they were designed for. Have you seen the adverts? They were invented especially for women of a certain age. Like me.'

Romana smiled and nodded into the mirror. She had lost the gist of what the old dear was on about. Luckily her hairdresser was keeping up.

‘So, why didn’t you buy one, Maude? What stopped you I hear they’re very expensive.’

Maude shrugged. ‘The money isn’t a problem. I’d be happy handing over my life savings for one of them things. I know a couple of women - older than me! - from bingo, who’ve splashed out on a Suitor, and they’re very satisfied.’

A Suitor? thought Romana.

‘Oh, very satisfied indeed. Suitors can do anything. They never tire, and they never give up, if you get my drift. They can do your housework for you, too! But mostly what they’re programmed for is... well, you know... wooing and courting and... what not.’

Ah, thought Romana. Robots. Rather early, wasn’t it 1979? She closed her eyes and let her mind drift a little. She wasn’t over keen on uncovering some new mystery this afternoon, thank you very much.

‘I know what it is that’s put you off,’ said her hairdresser all of a sudden. ‘I’ve just realised! It’s the shocking reports, isn’t it?’

Shocking reports? wondered Romana vaguely.

‘Hmm,’ said the old lady. ‘It was indeed. I saw it on the news. Sudden disappearances. Old lady’s boudoirs being found abandoned, left in an uproar. And all of them owned a Suitor. The police have drawn the conclusion that all the missing pensioners are linked to the Erotic DoctorBots.’

The *what?* Romana’s eyes flew open at this. ‘The *what?’* she shouted at the old woman.

‘The Erotic DoctorBots,’ the old woman said. ‘You’ve seen them,

haven't you? They're everywhere this summer. Everyone wants one, don't they?'

Full Colour Spread

She found K9 flicking through magazines by the door. Well, not flicking exactly, but he was sucking up the contents in a very absorbed fashion. She'd never have thought he was that bothered about hair and shoes and fashion.

She was wrong.

'Mistress!' he yapped. 'I have found something very, very disturbing.' She frowned, tapping her foot slightly.

'The mistress's hair looks very nice,' he said dutifully.

The other ladies, sitting close by, waiting their turns under Andre's skilled fingers, were very impressed at Romana's dog's solicitude.

'What have you found in *Cosmo,* K9?'

'This,' he said simply.

It was a two-page advert for a new brand of aftershave for men.

Instead of the usual brawny hairy chest and denim shirt that one might reasonably expect in such a spread... Romana found herself staring at a photo of a model in rather scruffy tweeds and a singed-looking multi-coloured scarf.

'What I was starting to suspect is true, then,' Romana gasped. 'Like when we saw that billboard advertising, and the side of that bus stop. It's him! It's all him! Somehow - without even knowing it - the Doctor has gone and made himself into a sex symbol!'

Flattery

That vain and stupid man! she seethed. She knew very well how he would react when she and K9 returned to the ship and told him

what was going on. He wouldn't be appalled and horrified like she was. He wouldn't think for a second about the implications for the web of time. He'd be flattered and pleased.

The men of Earth were aspiring to look just like him; to become exactly like him.

His reaction?

Good thing, too! I don't know why it took them so long. Hurray for good taste!

That was the thing with him, Romana thought grumpily, sitting on the bus with her robot dog. (Half fare for a robot dog!) The Doctor was a whole lot more superficial than anyone would think. Oh, to everyone else: there he goes, bounding about in eternity and forever seeing the bigger, multidimensional picture. But she lived with him on a daily basis and, really, he was pretty shallow and silly on the whole. And, of course, when she told him what was going on here in 1979, his eyes lit up.

'Oh!' he said beadily. 'Well, you know... I *do have* a certain bearing and charisma...'

So there was a spring in his step as he went flicking switches and yanking leads around on the control console.

Romana was furious! She went off to choose an outfit for going out to dinner. The old fool hadn't noticed her hair, either.

Dogging

K9 was watchdogging at home, though there wasn't much need. The TARDIS had materialised on a canal tow path at the edge of an industrial estate. No one would bother it.

He bid them farewell sadly. He wished he was going with them into town for an Italian.

Romana was still terribly miffed, even though the Doctor had

praised her new frock. He was still in the same old ratty and tatty ensemble. K9 was very sanguine about the Doctor's whole look becoming trendy and sexy. It turned out that he'd always thought the Doctor-Master was an admirable-looking person. A well-turned out gentleman.

'Why, thank you, K9,' the Doctor had beamed, clapping on his hat.

'And so I am!'

Tete a Tete

Over Pinot Noir and deliciously sloppy pasta, Romana was becoming terse. She leaned across the red-and-white checked tablecloth and hissed, 'But doesn't it bother you? That someone knows you so well they can market your whole style?'

He stared back at her through the candlelight.

'You mean... the Black Guardian?' he gasped. 'Has gone into fashion? And fragrance?'

'Don't be ridiculous.' She shook out her napkin and gave her tagliatelle a desultory poke. 'You're so... glib.'

He considered this. 'Hmm. You're right. Glib. I'm glib. And sexy. Apparently!'

She rolled her eyes. 'Do you know, that aftershave... They claim it has an irresistible whiff of old tweed and jelly babies and a wistful undertone of burning circuitry...'

'Ha! That's good!' And he chuckled away to himself, twisting his pasta round his fork. 'Still, I suppose you're right. It sounds very much like someone is mucking around with time and everything and it'll be up to us to sort it out.'

'It's these robots I don't like the sound of,' she said.

'Hmmmm.' He nodded. 'Do they look very like me?'

‘I haven’t seen one yet.’

Still, he thought. The people they’d encountered so far on this evening out had been treating him very strangely. Warily, almost. Hushed respect. Restrained excitement. Awe. As if he was very famous indeed. As if he was very sexy indeed.

‘I don’t want to involve UNIT,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Usually they’d be one of my first ports of call in this period, if I discovered something fishy. But on this occasion, I think not.’

‘You’re embarrassed,’ she laughed. ‘You think your military chums will laugh at you.’

He shrugged. And then they were interrupted by a young woman from the table across the way. She had sidled up nervously, with a napkin she said she’d like the Doctor to sign. For her gran.

‘Oooh, she loves you, my gran,’ said the young woman. ‘She’s saving up, you know. For one of your robots. One just like you. But to think... I can tell her... I’ve met the real thing!’

The young woman swallowed tremulously and stared at him. ‘You are... the real thing, aren’t you? You really are... him?’

The Doctor grinned broadly. ‘I am! I am! I’m me!’

And afterwards, after they’d tried to pay the bill (the owner wouldn’t let them! He wanted photos taking. Of the Doctor standing with him and all the waiters. To go up, pride of place, on the wall), the Doctor and Romana were walking off through the dark city streets and his mood was changing. It became pensive.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘Someone up to no good. Needs sorting.’ Romana took his arm. ‘You’re a bit fiddly,’ she said fondly.

‘Hurray!’ he said. ‘Hurray for good taste!’

Industrious

K9 plugged himself into the TARDIS's sensors while they were away. He bided the time drinking up all sorts of local data.

And that was how he picked up on the alarming power surges going on in the factory not two miles away from the TARDIS.

The factory was using technology that simply shouldn't exist on Earth in this period.

K9 felt very pleased with himself. He wagged his tail, eager for the Master and Mistress to return, so he could tell them.

The factory was emanating some very strange data. It would need investigating. And he would have to go with them, naturally.

To the factory called... what was it? Ah, yes. Wildthyme Unlimited.

Investigators

Somebody already had this adventure well in hand. Somebody was already investigating the factory with its queer power surges and its robotic army that patrolled the perimeter fence and all the miles of corridors within.

So while the Doctor and Romana made their tipsy way back to the TARDIS, to sleep on their suspicions and misgivings, two rather more conscientious investigators of everything strange and untoward were using wire cutters and shimmying under electrified fences.

Excitement

He insisted on leading the way across the compound, from doorway to doorway, gallant as ever, and just as foolhardy. Sarah had no choice but to follow in his footsteps.

'It looks just like an ordinary factory to me, old girl.' He frowned, as they both huddled in the shadows.

‘It’s not,’ she insisted. ‘I had that private tour, remember. And I saw things I wasn’t supposed to see. They’re up to something here, Harry.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Don’t you think it’s weird? Those robots of theirs? The Suitors?’
‘Robot Doctors. Who’d have thought it? But even if it’s strange, I don’t see what harm it’s doing…’

‘Oh, *Harry,’* she hissed. Sometimes he could be so obtuse. They’d only been reunited for about a day and a half and he was already driving her mad. Just as he had years ago.

‘All right, old girl. We’ll trust your instincts.’ He grinned and brandished his wire cutters. ‘Let’s break in.’

It was the Doctor who connected them and it was with him they had shared some of the most terrifying moments of their lives. Neither had heard from him or of him in years. They had slipped back into their own relatively quiet lives and vaguely imagined him flying about in time and space, having a whale of a time without them.

Both secretly held out hopes that he’d land on their doorstep once more.

Occasionally Sarah and Harry would meet to have a drink and talk over their adventures. Living in the past. Nothing new to talk about. Nothing in their current lives to compare with what they’d experienced together, in the earlier part of that decade. That made them both feel sad. As if time travel had aged them prematurely.

So there was always something a bit upsetting about Sarah and Harry’s reunions. Except now. Here was excitement. Here was something out of the ordinary.

These sinister androids flooding the domestic market! Old women snapping them up and hurrying them home and getting them to do their bidding! Gigolobots - also known as Erotic DoctorBots. And

both Harry and Sarah had been appalled to see the shape these automatons had taken - with their disturbingly familiar shock of brown, curly hair, manic grin and ludicrously long scarf. Could this all be the Doctor's doing? Why had he made himself into an international sex symbol? Could it be the doing of one of his awful enemies?

And then came the disappearances. Wrecked bungalows and no sign of robots nor owners.

That's what brought Sarah and Harry tiptoeing through these factory corridors, penetrating deeper and deeper into the complex. She would never have admitted it, but Sarah found Harry's presence very reassuring.

'So, when you had your official tour of this place,' he said, 'when you told them you were writing a magazine story, how did they explain the DoctorBots? Did they say how they chose the... model?'

Sarah frowned, chewing her lower lip. 'They were evasive about that. They just said they'd hit upon a formula they knew lots of senior citizens would love. And how it was all the inspiration of the owner of Wildthyme Unlimited.'

'Did you meet this owner?'

'Not this time,' Sarah said, grimly. 'Not yet.'

'You know this person? You've met before?'

Sarah nodded. 'If it's who I think it is... Oh, yes.'

He jumped and seized her wrist. 'Listen! Footsteps!'

Sure enough, there came a tall, menacing figure sweeping towards them from around the next corner. His eyes were intent and his scarf was flailing out around him.

'Run!' Sarah screamed and it felt very odd to be running from the Doctor. And more Doctors! They came out of the woodwork with

plastic hands outstretched, pursuing them as they pelted ever deeper into the complex.

Fretting In Her Boudoir

After a while and just before the drear dawn, quiet and calm returned to the factory. The two intruders were captured almost effortlessly by the tireless ‘Bots and they were slung in a cell deep underground.

The single shareholder of Wildthyme Unlimited sat in her heart of operations, sleepless all night, and mulled everything over.

Tomorrow was a hellishly busy day. The first of the new models would be rolling off the conveyor belt and would require testing out. She would need all of her strength for the test drive.

Yet she sat up all night in her boudoir, fretting.

In her new (rather delectable, she thought) incarnation and a blue silk nightie trimmed in mink.

In her new body she felt... rather sexy, actually. And just a bit naughty and evil.

So... they were on to her little game. All the meddlers and investigators and spoilers. Maybe they would put the kybosh on her intrigues.

She doubted it. She was doing nothing wrong. Not really.

She flicked a sensor pad on the arm of her chair. A door shot open and two identical DoctorBots came traipsing in, grinning.

‘Feeling a bit tense, loveys,’ she said, with a shrug. ‘I could do with a good rub.’

Thank the Goddess she’d given them sensitive fingers.

Riled

What has got me so riled in the middle of the night? wondered Romana. She was sitting up in bed.

What's got my goat in the middle of the night?

Not that 'in the middle of the night' meant much, here aboard the TARDIS, which of course occupied some region - as the Doctor always put it - in which time and space were one. Like much of what he said, Romana found this statement of his almost completely nonsensical. He was always making high-flown, vaguely poetical, quite inaccurate statements and they were something else that got on Romana's wick.

She'd been travelling with him for a number of years now and there was always some novel irritation he could spring on her at any given moment. She smiled.

The TARDIS was a good place to go wandering, stomping, traipsing, marching, gadding about through the sleepless night. Its corridors were infinite. It was like patrolling the pristine intestines of the biggest beast in the galaxy. It was cool and calm and the insomniac Romana found it useful to go pacing up and down and round and round and round and round all night and somehow she never got lost.

Why did he drive her mad? Why did he?

Hours Later

When she had tired of wandering all the corridors - exhausted herself really, like some fairy-tale princess dancing herself silly and wearing down the soles of her satin shoes - she found herself delivered to the bright, humming cavern of the console room.

Morning. Good morning! Artificial morning!

And the exterior doors were swishing open and here came the Doctor, striding in from outdoors. He was beaming and shabby and holding a half-eaten bacon sandwich and slurping tea out of a

Styrofoam cup. He had been out all night without her.

‘Ah! There you are! I’ve been having a look round. Didn’t want to wake you.’ She pursed her lips.

‘This mysterious factory K9 was rabbiting on about. We went to have a look.’ The dog was at his heels - smug.

‘It’s the place where they manufacture my robot selves! My dubious duplicates! You must come and see, Romana. It’s terribly interesting.’

‘Hmm,’ she said lightly.

‘Just fancy! Someone going to all that trouble! Just to make lots and lots of *me!’*

Memory Bank

K9 went through his records. He was hunting out a likely suspect. His ears twiddled round thoughtfully as the following names occurred to him:

Sutekh the Destroyer. Blown to smithereens. Unlikely.

Davros. Unlikely. Not born yet Shot to smithereens anyway.

Omega. No horrid sticky antimatter detected in the vicinity. In anti-smithereens.

Mehendri Solon. Not born yet Unlikely.

Morbius. Smithereens. Unlikely.

The Black Guardian. Tends towards more cosmic predicaments.

The Master. Smithereens.

Azal the Daemon. Possibly. Most likely, smithereens.

Iris Wildthyme. Hmmmm.

K9 often checked through the database like this. And this time he had a brainwave. He printed off a set of handy pocket-sized cards. Each one featured one of the Doctor-Master's enemies. There was a picture of them at the top for ease of recognition in dicey situations, and there were written details underneath the picture, as to the enemy's past misdeeds, known whereabouts, super powers and fear rating.

'What are you up to over there?'

The Doctor thought K9's cards were marvellous.

'Why! They're like Top Trumps!' he cried, flicking through the pack. 'And so useful, too! Can I keep them?'

'Of course, Master,' K9 yapped. 'I made them especially for you. And the mistress. To help you in your adventures.'

'Will you print off a set for Romana, K9? She'll be needing them even more than I do. She's been in this job such a short time compared to me... '

Romana scowled. No doubt, she found K9's pack of Monstrous Enemy cards very embarrassing. There was no way she would bring herself to use them.

Sexy For Centuries

'It's still the same her,' Sarah said, with satisfaction. 'She's regenerated and she's lost a few stone and, by the looks of it, dyed her hair purple, but it's still the same woman. The same awful woman.'

This was the following morning, when Sarah and Harry were being led along by two impassive DoctorBots into the gilded and ornate secret chamber at the heart of the factory.

Harry was gazing around with some interest. 'So you say you and

the Doctor met her before? Wasn't she supposed to be some kind of old friend of his?'

Sarah pulled a face. 'She was a little too friendly, for the Doctor's taste... ' Frisky, he'd called it.

Then they were confronted by the triumphant and gleeful Ms Wildthyme: glorious in a lilac one-piece and svelte as a dumpling.

'My dears,' she said, grinning. 'Sarah! It has been simply ages. I'm not sure I've met your delectable man friend before. I must congratulate him on his sideburns...'

Harry blushed.

'Don't trust her, Harry,' Sarah hissed.

'Oh, she seems all right to me...'

'I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you when you made your first, official visit to my complex, Sarah. I was awfully tied up. Suitors, Inc. is incredibly time consuming and draining, as I'm sure you can imagine.'

'What do you think you're doing?' Sarah thundered. 'You know that the Doctor doesn't want attention drawn to his activities here on Earth. When he's here he has to keep a low profile. He can't go round being famous! And... he can't go round... being sexy. That just isn't him!'

Iris smirked. 'Isn't it?'

'Of course it isn't!' Sarah stammered. 'He's the Doctor!'

'Well, I've found him sexy for centuries,' said Iris. 'There must be something very strange about me.'

'Oh, I'm sure there isn't... ' said Harry, and Sarah rolled her eyes at him.

Suddenly Iris was clapping her hands together. ‘Let us see what you make of my newest invention. Let us examine the latest clockwork toy to roll off the production line here at Suitors, Inc.’

She was grinning with barely repressed joy and pressing her chubby hands together.

At the far end of the room, the doors swished open and a tall, rather elegant figure stepped through into the opulent chamber.

‘Oh, my God.’ Sarah choked.

He came, all in velvet and ruffles, with his bouffant blazing silver in the light from the chandeliers. He marched towards them with his cloak streaming behind him, shot his frilly cuffs, and bowed sharply as he stood before Iris’s throne.

‘Mistress,’ he purred. ‘I am here at your command.’

Fence

In the long grass on the inside of the perimeter fence, the Doctor had managed to wrestle one of his robotic selves to the ground and deactivate it. ‘Fascinating piece of work,’ he bellowed, prising at the thing’s face with his sonic screwdriver. ‘And - *goodness!* - he’s anatomically correct in almost every detail!’

Romana, who was helping K9 to slip under the metal fence, had straightened up and just noticed the name of the factory’s owner on the side of the building.

‘Her?’ she groaned. ‘Why didn’t you say?’

The Doctor shrugged, happily fiddling with his doppelganger.

‘I suppose it makes complete sense, though,’ she went on. ‘She’s always had a very peculiar, obsessive relationship with you, hasn’t she?’

‘Why peculiar?’

‘Oh, you know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t. You think that, to be obsessed with me, someone would have to be very peculiar indeed.’ He was frowning heavily. ‘You know, I think I resent that.’

Romana was exasperated. ‘Look at what she’s done! She’s flooded the market - the whole of your precious planet Earth, for all we know - with robotic facsimilies of you. Robot sex slaves who appear to kidnap their owners and whisk them off to nobody-knows-where! Are you telling me that this scheme is the work of someone wholly balanced and sane?’

He shrugged huffily, still poking at his robot double. ‘I never said that much. But I don’t think she has to be mad to... what’s it called... *fancy* me.’

‘Fancy?’ Romana laughed out loud. *‘Fancy!* Oh, Doctor... You just don’t know the meaning of the word.’ She was doubled up by now.

‘Hahahahahahahahahahaha!’

The Doctor glared at her furiously.

Then he swapped coats with his android self (because the one the android was wearing was of better quality and also because he had come up with one of his rather special plans).

Romana could stand around laughing like a crazy woman all day if she wanted to. He, meanwhile, had work to do.

Plans

There are a number of options available to us at this stage of an adventure such as this, mused K9. One obvious route is to destroy the whole factory complex. Perhaps the military could bomb it. The Doctor has friends like that, doesn’t he? Or, perhaps, while he’s inside the building, he could tamper with the machinery at the heart of the complex and set it to have a nervous breakdown or

explode or something.

He needs, at some point, to come face to face with an army of himself. I imagine that's what he's doing in there now, don't you, Mistress? Now that he's inveigled himself into that industrial complex, he's most probably peering over a banister, down into some sinister concrete space... and there's a regiment of Doctors... all primed and hatted and scarfed... and ready to take over the world.

He's probably grinning down at them, and they're grinning back.

K9 was trundling alongside Romana, around the perimeter of the fence.

'We can't just blow the whole place up,' she sighed. 'Not with Iris there. No matter what she's done, the Doctor would never let us simply blow her up.'

'A pity,' sighed K9.

They were both doing a lot of sighing.

'Do you think he could have feelings for her?' Romana asked.

'Surely not,' the dog scoffed. Feelings? For her?

Romana shrugged. She felt around in her pockets for the brain of the robot Doctor. She'd confiscated it before the Doctor himself went running into the factory. 'If we could figure out exactly how these work... perhaps we could find some way of sabotaging them...'

K9 nodded. That was the other way of proceeding, and one he was just about to suggest to his mistress. Rather than wholesale bombing and destruction... the best way was to find some method of jamming the signals by which Iris was controlling the mechanical minds of her robotic Suitors.

Then, maybe they could build some hefty-looking, futuristic-

looking weapon that could shoot out beams that would make all of their enemies simply collapse!

‘Good plan.’ Romana nodded tersely. ‘Let’s get back to the ship and get on with it.’ She patted his nose. ‘We’re better off without him, really, aren’t we?’

Marched About

They were used to being marched about by the Suitors by now. Sarah and Harry had become quite blasé about all of their enemies looking just like one of their dearest, most-missed old friends.

When they were marched back to their cell this time, they took hardly any notice of the DoctorBot that was leading them along.

That was, until they reached their cell and he grinned at them.

Sarah blinked. ‘It’s really you, isn’t it?’

He gathered them up in an impulsive hug. ‘It is! It is!’ he bellowed. ‘Fancy seeing you here!’

And, next thing they knew, they were running through the corridors again, away from their cell and deeper into the complex. Harry at Sarah’s heels, Sarah at the Doctor’s. Sarah’s heart thudding madly so that her ears were ringing with… well, joy.

It’s him! It’s him! It’s really him!

Binky

Of course, Iris was working for a higher power. She wasn’t up to all this malarkey of her own volition. What had started out as a reasonably fun endeavour and wheeze had become something altogether deadlier because of the intercession of…

‘Binky,’ Iris said, giving an abrupt curtsy to the colossal viewscreen. ‘Greetings from Earth. Greetings to all on the Pussyworld.’

Binky tutted. Binky was a Siamese, wearing a tiara. Binky was on a pile of satin cushions in a boudoir of her own, a million parsecs from Earth. And Binky wasn't altogether happy.

'Where are my old ladies?' thundered Binky. 'This scheme of yours started out well, Wildthyme. Then it started slowing down and down and now it's at a standstill. The supply has dried up.'

Iris shuddered. She hated being used as somebody's servant. 'We are trying to fulfil your deadlines, Madame Binky. We'll be sending more old ladies soon.'

'Good,' purred Binky, 'because I will not tolerate failure. You send enough old ladies here to the Pussyworld, or we keep your bus. And without it, you'll be stuck on that ghastly planet forever. Miaow!'

With that, Binky vanished.

Iris was left sitting slumped on her throne with her head in her hands. Oh, how had she ever become involved in this ridiculous scheme?

And - oh, Binky, how can you turn against me so? And how was I to know you were the powerful warrior queen of a world filled with evil cats? And what the hell do you want with a million old ladies anyway? Iris's mind boggled.

So solicitous and responsive were her marvellous DoctorBots, they picked up immediately on her disconsolate mood, and three of them hurried over to pet and primp and generally cheer her up.

'Ooooh,' she said. 'Loveys! Oooh, you *are* good to me! And really, you're the next best thing to the real thing, aren't you? And I'd imagine that it's worth it to those poor old ladies... just one hour of pleasure with you lot... and then to be whisked off through time and space... in a sexy shanghai to the Pussyworld... why, it's not such a terrible fate after all, is it, really? I've not really done anything bad at all, have I? Hmmmm?'

But she knew she had really. Wartorn

Velvet and Tweed

The Doctor stopped abruptly, Sarah and Harry hot on his heels. They'd come face to face with the newest of the Suitors. It was the more debonair, silverly patrician version. The expert-in-karate version. 'AAAIIIIIIYAAAA!' said this new one, flashing his hands like deadly blades. 'Ulp,' said the Doctor. 'I think he wants a fight.'

Sarah grabbed his elbow. 'Your previous self was quite nifty. Watch out, Doctor!'

Harry squared his jaw and put his dukes up. 'I'm here to help, Doctor!' At that very second, the robot duplicate launched his attack. 'AAAAIIIIIIYYYYAAAA!'

News

K9 soldered wires on the large, silver, machine-gun-shaped device that Romana had lashed together. It hadn't taken her long. It was a very impressive piece of work.

Meanwhile, she was watching a news broadcast on the scanner screen. 'Mistress?' K9 asked. He hadn't really been listening.

'More bad news about the DoctorBots,' she said. 'They've been malfunctioning. Exploding at the most inopportune moments. With nasty results.'

'Exploding?'

She shook her head. 'Losing their temper. I didn't mean blowing up. Shouting. Being irritated. Being irritating. Being the very opposite of a gentleman. I should have known that anything made by Iris would go wrong... '

'The device is completed, Mistress,' he said. 'Let's call it the Kybosh Machine!'

Which Is What They Did

And, as Romana led the way determinedly from the TARDIS on the canal towpath back towards the evil industrial complex, she was reflecting that she found adventures quite easy, actually.

That is, she found them much easier to get on with and finished and sorted out than the Doctor did. She was even starting to suspect that he span the things out... Just for the fun of it. She wouldn't put it past him.

He loved all of it. All the getting captured/escaping/running away/ putting on disguises/going back in, undercover/getting captured again...

He went in for all that with great gusto.

Romana tended to want to finish things off neatly. She found a certain satisfaction in the neatest and most efficient straight line between A and B.

So here she came, thumping through the long grass in her hunting boots, with the glitteringly proficient Kybosh Machine slung over her shoulder.

'It's an interesting question,' K9 mused. 'Why does he drag things out? Why does he make our adventures and missions more complicated and dangerous than they need to be? And why, do we let him?' K9 was finding the rough ground hard going, but he struggled on. 'Remember how long it took us to find all the components of the Key to Time?'

Romana shuddered. 'Don't remind me.'

She was determined to hurry the Doctor up. To stop him messing about.

He desired adventure. He desired complications. That's how it seemed to her. She couldn't see the point in any of that, and neither could their robot dog.

The kind of nonsense that both the Doctor and Iris went in for... that they were steeped in... it meant nothing to Romana and K9. It was all a bit immature.

‘If we had adventures of our own, Mistress,’ said K9 wistfully, as they slipped under the metal fence once more, ‘I feel that they would be very sensible ones.’

And not ones in which a giant Siamese cat was glaring down from a giant viewscreen, hypnotising everyone present in Iris’s centre of operations. Not adventures where this cat - their deadliest foe - was, it seemed, called Binky.

They arrived full of gumption and common sensical determination. They set the Kybosh Machine to full and devastating power. DoctorBots came running out at them with scarves flailing and rubberised hands clawing at them.

Very coolly, Romana swished past her enemies, towards that central chamber.

It was time to put an end to it.

But a portal was open by now and all her compatriots on this adventure - Sarah, Harry, Iris, the Doctor himself... all were marching into the swirling vortex in time for a deadly audience with the crazed Binky and her hordes of kidnapped old ladies.

Romana howled with frustration. ‘Not even the Kybosh Machine can get us out of this one!’ she seethed. ‘Can’t you see, K9? It’s not as easy as all that! We can’t just put a stop to them!’

She felt herself and K9 being drawn into that vortex after the Doctor and Iris and the companions and the hordes of marching DoctorBots.

‘Miaow,’ said Binky, from across the other end of the universe.

They were being drawn into new adventures. Just as they always were.

Short Trips: A Day In The Life

Simon Guerrier really has been the stalwart of the Short Trips range. He contributed to the first collection, *Zodiac*, then went on to write several hundred more stories than anyone else and edit four collections. It's easy to see why: his stories are always filled with fascinating, well-written characters, his prose style is so direct and immediate... and he always delivers his drafts on time!

He is also very good at coming at a theme or a brief from an interesting angle. In this case, A Day in the Life called for stories set at a certain time of day. The fictional running time of the book added up to 24 hours, so each story had to fill a specific slot. Simon's story is a thoughtful Seventh Doctor tale set in London and takes place in late afternoon. It uses all those evocative elements of a city at that time of day: grey skies, rain, rush-hour traffic, masses of people.

The fact that How You Get There is set in London is essential to its tone. Although taking place in a near future (note the sly reference to the euro), all *the* geography, bus times and routes are accurate, and Simon skilfully conjures up that special urban feeling. He also enjoys adding in titbits of trivia, such as the reasons for buses arriving in multiples. In fact, the story is quite episodic in structure, allowing Simon to pause and focus on characters such as Elsie and Tyler. While they're at the fore, it delightfully becomes their story for a few moments.

How You Get There is a bit of a nexus point for Big Finish fiction. Of course, its companion is Bernice Summerfield. This wasn't her only appearance in Short Trips, but it has added significance because, after this story was originally published, Simon took over as the producer of her solo audio adventures. The story also features characters from the UNIT series of audio dramas (which both Simon and I worked on) and, on top of that, *How* You Get There was part of a loose trilogy of stories in A Day in the Life. Simon's story was followed by Matthew Griffiths's The Last Broadcast and The Terror *of* the Darkness by Joseph Lidster, another ex-UNIT writer who also

used the characters from that series. The three adventures were all set on the same late afternoon in London, and the three writers worked hard to invent crossovers and give *the* trilogy a pleasing consistency. The Last Broadcast, for example, starts just as *How* You Get There is ending and begins with a comment that the heavy rain has just ceased.

As its tide suggests, How You Get There is slightly different. Whereas most Doctor Who adventures would avoid the practicalities of how the Doctor gets across a busy city in rush-hour traffic, Simon focuses on that problem. By doing that, we see how the Doctor interacts with the people he meets along *the* way - not just evil scientists and alien invaders but real everyday people living their lives. And Simon's Doctor is a wonderfully written part: a friend to everyone yet still an outsider. He affects everyone he meets, mostly in a positive way, but do they really know him?

That sums up the Doctor pretty well, doesn't it?

Ian Farrington

How You Get There
Simon Guerrier

A fat blob of rain obscured the time. He tied to rub it away and it burst, smearing across the digital display: 16.37. The rain had already started, pattering vaguely down from the greying sky. He glanced again at the timetable, trying to gauge how late he would be. Would there be time? The rush hour had begun. Rush hours, he thought, plural. And 'rush' was the wrong word, too. This was the slowest part of the day, even on a Saturday.

The Doctor snapped his watch shut and swung the chain around his finger. The watch arced neatly up and over, gliding into his breast pocket. His eyes darted left and right, checking who had seen. He liked to play to an audience. The other people at the bus stop had their faces bowed. With a sigh, the Doctor lifted his umbrella from the crook of his arm and unfurled it.

No bus came. He leant out into the unmoving traffic, staring up the hill. A few of the others waiting looked up and round, hoping he'd seen something coming. Nothing. Their heads drooped sadly down again.

The lights further up the road changed to red. Traffic edged forward from a queue round the corner, up and to the left on Champion Park. There was no room for them. The Doctor could sense the cross, caged people inside, green-lit at last, yet only able to squash up behind another avenue of unmoving vehicles. How long had they been stuck on that last stretch of road? Creeping agonisingly by the dark edifice of the Salvation Army headquarters and Denmark Hill train station, while on the pavements beside them mothers and children overtook them at a stroll. What a miserable way to travel.

Handbrakes clucked off as the cars ahead nosed forward, maybe getting two hundred yards before halting again. The Doctor's eyes lit up as he spotted a taxi, but its light was out and he saw the passenger snuggled in the back. Besides, he'd spent his last few euro

on a pre-pay ticket for the 185. He could do nothing else. He would have to be patient.

No bus came. He had meant to get the train, of course. The 16.17 to Victoria had been ideal, dropping him off with more than half an hour to spare. He hadn't planned for engineering works. He'd thought London had finally done away with those.

The spotting of rain became drizzle. The traffic lights changed again, trapping cars between lanes. Horns and voices swore. Cars pushed up close to let others through. No one was going anywhere fast. No one was going anywhere.

The Doctor's nostrils flared at a sudden, sweet odour: blackcurrant and mushrooms. A bus! It ploughed majestically down its designated lane, puffing out the rich, organic stink of recycled fuels. The others at the bus stop all leaned out to see it coming. A 484, 'Camberwell' in yellow letters in the window. Terminating at the next stop, no good to anyone.

The Doctor stepped back to let the bus draw in, and almost fell over an elderly woman right behind him. He flustered an apology, and she smiled up at him. She looked worn out. Her wrinkles told of long years of kindness and concern. Her shoulders were speckled with rain. She made no move for this bus, so the Doctor held his arm out, sharing his umbrella with her. Her eyes twinkled. She took a step forward, nestling with him under the canopy.

'Waitin' long?' she said, her drawl South London and Jamaica.

'Fifteen minutes.'

'Hm,' she said. 'They meant to come every twelve. An' when they do come up, they come in threes. Reckon that's them being funny with us.'

'It's economics,' he said, staring up the line of cars. 'Supply and demand.' She blinked at him. He needed no more prompting.

'Imagine you have three buses, all twelve minutes apart. And the

first bus takes three minutes picking up its passengers. The second bus is then just nine minutes behind. Yes?'

'Should get here quicker then.'

'Well, yes. And no. The second bus turns up, and there are fewer passengers to collect. So it moves off straight away. If that keeps happening, stop after stop, the second bus will catch up the first.'

'You get one bus crammed full of people, and one right behind it all empty!' He smiled. 'There's a reason for everything. Somewhere.'

The old woman's eyes were wide. 'I tell my husband, next time. He's always one for answers.' She hesitated. Londoners were wary of strangers, the Doctor knew. It didn't do to start a conversation on public transport. One of the most densely populated places on the planet and they had a village mentality. A hundred tiny villages, all different characters, all squodged up together. That was London all over. They were fiercely protective of their own space, their privacy, savage about territory and their postcodes. Perhaps that was how they survived.

The old woman, however, gave up a morsel. 'He's in the hospital here.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said, letting her share her woes. 'His bones. Had terrible trouble with 'em all his life.'

The Doctor smiled, sadly.

'You been visiting too?'

'Other side of the road,' he said. On the corner opposite them stood a tall, ornately wrought totem pole, a vent for the sewers below. Behind this, sprawled the complex of buildings that made up the psychiatric unit.

'I...' said the old woman, and faltered. He shouldn't have been surprised. Mental illness had been in the news, the latest target of tabloid spleen. The medical staff had been grateful to share their

fears about new initiatives, imposed in light of 'public concern'. Random and reactionary, the measures made nothing any better. The patients were the ones who really suffered. It always hit the ones most in need.

'He's all right really. Always had funny ideas,' said the Doctor. The old woman seemed relieved. 'Thought he could control the weather, that sort of thing.'

She ducked her hand out from under the umbrella, checking the status of the rain. 'I'd have brought a coat if they'd forecast this,' she said. 'Perhaps your friend's to blame!' She grinned up at him, her face radiant. He doubted she smiled very often, not recently. She should.

'Not this time,' he said.

No bus came. He could do nothing about it. But, while he was here...

'Tell me about your husband, Elsie,' he said. She never asked how he knew her name.

Elsie told him everything. Her husband, his illness, their son who never called, the grandson she'd lost all contact with. The little man made it easy. Her worries poured out.

His bus appeared, up the road. Gently, he took her hand.

'It's been a pleasure,' he said. Elsie felt her heart sink. He couldn't go now, she still had so much to say. How long since she'd last spoken to someone, been heard? Sure, she shared cursory words with the nurses all the time. And occasionally they still had checkout girls on in the supermarket. She always went to them if she could, just for that momentary contact with another human being. She hated dealing with the self-service machines they usually had. She hated the machines around her husband's bed, too. She hated them breathing for him. She hated feeling like she should talk to them, not the cold, unhearing body on the bed. She'd never realised how angry they made her, not until now. He'd awakened

something in her. She suddenly felt alive!

He stepped back and doffed his hat to her, making it dance up his arm. Her dad had had a hat like that. He'd been another one able to make her laugh.

The man joined the huddle round the doors to his bus. The rain was getting worse, bedraggling people and blotching their skin. Elsie watched the man let other people shove by. Why bother pushing, she thought. It didn't get you where you were going any faster. Your pick of the seats would still be torn and dirty fabric, plastered over with chewing gum.

Further up the road, another bus appeared, nosing out from round the corner. She squinted to read the display, looking for the shape of the words, not individual letters. 'Oxford Circus'.

'Hey!' she called. 'Mister! Sir!' People looked round. She didn't care. He turned, surprise and worry on his face. Perhaps he thought she would kiss him. 'My bus is right behind!' she said. It seemed so silly, so fleeting. People were staring at her, some jabbing out elbows to herd her from their way.

The man mouthed, 'Thank you', and let the tide wash him up into the bus.

The 176 crawled nearer. Elsie put her arm out, but there were others ahead of her, flagging it down. She looked up. The man had taken the front seat upstairs. It had been her favourite spot when she was small, the one with the best view. He perched next to some angry-looking youth with headphones on, bassline no doubt thumping. She could almost hear it in the street. The man hunched over, scrutinising an old-fashioned pocket watch. His face was grim, with none of the sparkle and energy he'd had when they spoke. He looked like someone she knew. Someone she'd once seen.

Of course, she thought. In church they had a statue of St Christopher, patron saint of travellers. He was a thin, crooked figure, bent over under the weight of the Christ-child and all the world's suffering and sin. The man's expression was the same.

He looked out, saw her. For a second he looked guilty, like a child caught thieving biscuits. The bus growled off towards the city. Before he vanished from her life, the man winked down at her, impishly. Elsie couldn't help but grin back.

She tottered after her own bus. The rain fell ever more heavily, and the people shoved each other to get aboard. Some looked down at her. And despite themselves, when they met her eyes, they couldn't help grinning too.

For the first time in too many years, Elsie sat upstairs.

* * *

The bus glided to the lights at Camberwell Green. The Doctor looked down on the traffic, queuing alongside the bus lane. Ahead of them, a Golf had used the lane to overtake, and now couldn't get back in among the other cars. Drivers pretended not to see, ignoring the Golfs increasingly pushy feints and nudges forward. A sudden flash: a camera, set up by the lights, had caught the offending motorist. The Doctor shook his head sadly. These days the fines were crippling.

The bus turned left, leaving the traffic behind. Camberwell New Road was clear, and the bus picked up speed. The Doctor watched out the window, passing a modern school and then old-fashioned terraces, all converted into flats. The rain continued, and the Doctor felt the bus strain against a gathering wind. The pavements outside were clear of people - pedestrians had all found shelter.

Apart from the thudding bass beside him, the bus was quiet. The Doctor turned round in his seat to look back at his fellow passengers. They stared into space. Some glanced at him, meeting his gaze, then quickly looked away. They actually avoided contact. For a moment he was surprised, thought it rude, but even people who were clearly in couples or groups of friends were silent. He saw it for what it was: mutual respect. Their silence was acknowledgement of each other's own space.

Directly behind him sat a mother and child. The little boy looked bored out of his mind. That would not do at all.

You're invisible when you're with your son, until he misbehaves. When he's good, strangers feel free to coo over him, talk to him, pat him on the head. They never even look at you. When he was a baby, you couldn't walk five steps without some random well-wisher flagging you down, sticking their nose into his pram. Now he can answer their questions himself, you don't even get asked about him. It's always the same.

This guy, clowning about for Charlie's amusement, is different. He tries to involve you, too. He's going to do some magic trick, the sort of stuff your brother used to do. 'I need an assistant,' he says, and hands you an old two-pence piece. You feel like such an idiot, feeling everybody's eyes on you as you sit there, playing along. You don't say anything.

Charlie loves it, though. He craves attention. Nearly five and he still wants cuddles. He comes to find you in the middle of the night, sneaking into bed, curling up around you. Of course you don't mind, really. But what about when you've got someone else there? It'll happen some day. Someone will ask you out. Someone will buy you flowers. Maybe when Charlie's older, at school, not hanging on you all the time. He scares them off, the age he's at now.

The clown closes his hand over your fingertips, where you're holding the coin. You feel an electric tingle, a nervous thing like when you think your mobile's going off and it's not. The man opens his fingers out, showing you he's not hiding anything. And the coin has gone. He can't have palmed it - you know about palming from your brother's lame tricks. His hand really is empty.

'I've your full attention?' he says. You're not sure where his accent's from, but it's not local.

'Where is it?' you ask, betraying your interest. Your stop is coming up.

'Look in your sleeve,' he says. You raise your arm. Something sticks

out of the cuff, a slender green stalk. You don't understand. You pull on the stalk and out pops a bunch of flowers. Pretty white ones with yellow hearts like giant daisies. Real ones. You simply stare at them.

'Our stop, Mummy!' squeaks Charlie, pulling at your arm. He's right. You gather him and your bags up and clatter down the stairs as fast as you can. The rain is really hammering down as you duck into the station. You fish around for your tickets, still clutching the flowers. The real flowers.

It just isn't possible. It still isn't possible when you get home.

The windows fogged up as the rain grew worse. The Doctor wiped away a spy hole with the end of his scarf. The rain falling thick outside still shrouded the view. They were sat outside Oval Tube station, the road still clogged with cars.

The teenager next to him turned up his music to compete with the storm. He had paid no heed to the magic show. His loss. The Doctor checked his watch again. He had to keep busy, or he would go mad.

'Ugly It Up?' he said.

The boy pulled out an ear-chip. It grunted bassline in his fingers. 'Uh?' he said. The Doctor nodded at the headphone. 'Ugly It Up,' he said. 'That's the band.'

'Yeah,' said the boy, almost impressed. 'Got a problem with 'em?'

'I once played washboard for Jabba Jones,' said the Doctor. 'And spoons.'

'Yuh!' said the boy, shaking his head. Of course, the Doctor hadn't done it yet.

Jones still had to fall in love with jazz. 'Want me to turn it down, that it?'

'Not at all,' said the Doctor. 'Like I say, I'm a fan.'

The boy snorted, and put his ear-chip back in. Then he turned the volume down anyway. He kept glancing at the Doctor, watching for any sign of smugness. The Doctor gazed serenely through his spy hole. The art deco curve of Oval station shone electric blue through the rain. People thronged in the street. They were in T-shirts and shorts, soaked to the skin. The Doctor wondered if there had been an accident.

It was too soon, surely, for the Underground to have flooded.

Then he saw the answer, the high back of the cricket ground. Of course, play had been suspended. The crowd washed up against the bus, and the driver took pity. Sopping people clambered up to the top deck. They muttered at their misfortune, argued about the game. Passengers grudgingly made room for them, three to seats that barely took two. The bus filled right up, people on the stairs and in the gangways.

The Doctor checked his watch. Ten to five. He wouldn't make it.

Tyler kept his gaze fixedly out of the window, ignoring the odd man beside him. In his ears, Jabba Jones called for rioting in the streets. It had been Tyler's favourite track for weeks, but now he felt self-conscious. Tyler liked Ugly It Up 'cos they were angry, and the fury in their sound was wild, exciting. But sat with the odd man, it seemed... well, a bit immature. Like a kid having a tantrum. He never thought of it that way before. He took his ear-chips out and stuffed them into a pocket.

The bus curled slowly round the perimeter of the cricket ground. A blue plaque on a building to his left proclaimed itself the birthplace of Montgomery, whoever he was. The road straightened out in front of them again, leading down to Vauxhall and the cream-and-green building where James Bond worked. The passengers behind him fell silent. Tall behind the rooftops in front of them stood Millbank Tower, an ugly, concrete-and-glass stack ofoffices or something. Black clouds spiralled from its top floor, the epicentre of the storm. Pink lightning arced from the cloud. People behind Tyler gasped and gaped, some even cried. Tyler shivered. It didn't seem real, like

something out of a movie.

‘It’s going to be all right,’ the odd man said. He spoke quietly, but with such confidence and finality that Tyler believed him. The people on the bus must have heard him, too. There was a great sigh of relief, people letting their breath out all together.

‘But what is it?’ asked a woman some rows back. Tyler and the odd man both swivelled in their seats to look at her. The bus was packed fill of people, many of them wet through, all of them terrified.

‘It won’t hurt you,’ the odd man told them. ‘I won’t let it.’ For a moment they were with him. There was a sudden, deafening crash of thunder. People screamed.

‘You need something to raise your spirits,’ said the man. ‘How about a sing-song?’ Before anyone could laugh, he began *The Wheels On The Bus.* Tyler hadn’t heard that for years, but everyone knew the words. He found himself laughing. Despite themselves, the passengers joined in.

They made good progress towards Vauxhall. The Doctor let the passengers take the song for themselves. The Jabba Jones fan next to him had a strong singing voice. Soon the bus’s occupants were singing something equally heartening, if a little more adult in content. The chorus, defiant and plosive, made the Doctor blush.

The cricket fans took over the bawdy songs. Someone said it was like the Blitz. The Doctor explained to anyone who’d listen that crime rates had actually gone up during the war. People joined in, arguing, agreeing, making jokes, making friends. The boy with the ear-chips struck up conversation with a pretty girl, distracting her from the storm with cheeky banter.

They reached the roundabout at Vauxhall and should have passed straight through the centre on the bus lane. However, they were diverted by a police cordon, and had to take the long way round. Traffic stalled around them. The bus pulled into a stop, behind smart, expensive apartments that looked out on the river. They

were so nearly there.

The lights upstairs flickered off-on, off-on. The singing became a pantomime boo. The newly made friends jostled from their seats and tramped down the stairs, letting each other go first, laughing, swapping names and numbers. Outside, the storm crashed and howled worse than ever. The passengers spilled out into it.

‘We’re gonna find a pub or something,’ the teenager told the Doctor. He was holding the girl’s hand. ‘Buy you a drink?’

‘I’m booked elsewhere,’ said the Doctor. ‘But it was nice to meet you.’

‘It’s stopping here,’ said the boy when the Doctor made no sign of moving. ‘That’s why everyone’s getting off.’

‘I have to get across the river.’

‘You’ll need another bus.’

They bustled out into the rain, now clattering down like ball bearings.

The new couple hurried off down the street, still hand-in-hand. People ran for cover under awnings, or into the lobbies of offices who’d opened up their doors. They cowered under the arches of the bus station, or peeped from inside the railway arches. The Doctor put up his umbrella. It fought against him, bobbing and batting this way and that as the gale

caught it. He had to hold on with both hands.

* * *

A huge whirlpool gouged a hole in the Thames just in front of Millbank Tower. The river had become a monster. In thirty-odd years of policing, Dale Wingsworth had never seen anything like it. It had tugged away the central legs of Vauxhall Bridge, the road strip now fluttering under the onslaught. It wouldn’t last long. The

noise was horrendous.

Above him, the windows of the apartment buildings exploded out into the air. The buildings were steadfast, resolute against the storm. Still, Dale's heart went out to the poor souls stuck up there. It must be terrifying. Lights inside sparked and went out. He looked away, back to his post. On the main road, streetlights bent in the wind like palm trees. The roads were awash with water, sloshing up over his shoes.

Dale tried the radio in his car again. Nothing, just static. The storm must have taken down all the aerials. A London without mobile phones, he thought. It was practically medieval.

Outside, a man approached, bent double under his umbrella. Dale couldn't believe it at first. Even the men with guns guarding MI6 had gone indoors. He wound down the window of his door. The rain slapped him hard in the face.

'You'll be the Doctor?' he yelled.

The man stopped short, amazed. He hurried over. 'You've been expecting me?' 'Colonel Chaudhry said to keep an eye out for you.'

'I have to get across the river.'

'The bridge is going to go any minute.' 'I'd better get on with it, then.'

He stood before the rippling, twisting bridge. The Thames had come alive, clawing up at the structure. People watched him from the far end, behind and inside more police vehicles. He probably had a crowd behind him too. He'd better make this look good. He put the umbrella down, his muscles straining. He held it out, feeling its weight. He would use it as a prop, for balance. Buster Keaton had done something similar. Of course, that might have been a camera trick.

The wind grabbed his hat and hurled it off down towards City Hall.

The Doctor took one last, deep breath and sprinted forward across the bridge.

He nearly lost his footing as the bridge buckled up underneath him. He leant forward, keeping his profile low to the wind. He heard the crack of the tarmac behind him, didn't look back.

He surged ahead. The road suddenly fell away from under him. He tumbled down...

... and found himself hurtling through the air as the road surface snapped back, whiplashing up like a snake as it came free. He tipped forward, peddling with his legs, thinking like a cricket ball, and smacked down onto the slick rooftop of a police car. He rolled as he hit, sliding down the windshield, crashing into the bonnet. It buckled under his weight, breaking his fall. He splashed into the foot of water on the ground and came to a stop.

A drenched policeman helped him to his feet. The Doctor steadied himself. Vauxhall Bridge was gone, the unshackled roadway now heading downstream. Exhausted, the Doctor couldn't speak. He waved the policeman away and started running off down Millbank.

He cut across the road as he passed Tate Britain. Built on the foundations of the old penitentiary, he thought. The gallery and the jail, both out for the same ends. To improve people, to better the world. He ran on, nearly there now. It had been so long since he had been this way. That time at the prison? Or in the palace on the far side of the river?

He couldn't bear it being taken by the storm. All that history, swept clean away.

He wouldn't allow it.

Adam wouldn't be allowed to watch the rain. He sat loyally at his desk, waiting for the phone to ring. Across the courtyard, people sheltered in the restaurant and coffee shop, watching the downpour. Global warming, he thought. He remembered the delegation here earlier in the day. They'd told him about the weather going mad.

He'd been polite, of course, but he hadn't believed them. It couldn't be as bad as they made out. That was what he'd thought. But this...

A man, bent low in the rain, fell through the main door. He stood there, gasping for breath, a small lake forming on the floor around him. 'Raining?' said Adam, grinning and getting up from his seat. 'You'd think it was centred on this place!'

He made his way over to the coffee pot, warming by the wall. He wasn't really supposed to do this, but the poor bloke was wet through. Share the wealth, that's what his mum used to say. And all he could offer was a hot drink. 'You'll want some of this...' he was saying as he heard the lift ding open behind him. He turned, just in time to see the soaked man nip through the doors.

'Hey!' yelled Adam. The lift doors closed just before Adam reached them. Still holding the coffee pot, he hurried back to his desk. One of the switches could disable the lift. He reached for it. The key was missing. The man must have swiped it.

Adam pressed the police hot-line button.

* * *

Bernice stared into the black hole, into the barrel of Endwell's gun. Her handbag hung heavy on her arm. She thought for a second about putting on some lipstick, amazed how calm she felt about it. At her feet, Ross clutched his arms around his leg. The bullet had gone in just above his knee. She hoped she would be spared that pain. The blood soaked into the sleeves of his dinner jacket. His suit would be ruined.

Endwell's men, the terrorists, made no move to help. The shooting had taken them all by surprise, she noted, though not one of them would dare challenge Endwell. Only he had the gun, the others were just lab technicians, geeks he'd co-opted with the promise of a better world.

She glanced back up at Endwell. Just get it over, she thought. The gun wavered in his hand. He must have had some basic training for

this, knew to squeeze back on the trigger slowly, so as not to spoil the aim. Outside, wreckage clattered past the window even though they were on the top floor.

She had failed. That was what pained her the most: she'd failed the Doctor.

Ding!

She flinched at the sound of the lift arriving behind her. Damn. 'Hello, Benny,' she heard the Doctor say. She didn't look round. 'About time,' she said. She hoped it sounded tough and sarcastic.

She felt ready to cry.

The look on Endwell's face was priceless. This really wasn't his day.

The gun pointed first at her, then at Ross down on the ground, then over to her left. That would be where the Doctor was standing, then. Still, there was too much distance between them to go for the gun. Not without someone getting hurt.

'I had terrible trouble getting here,' said the Doctor. 'Emmett sends his love though.'

The name-drop decided things. Endwell jabbed the gun towards the Doctor.

'Emmett is a lunatic!' he said, his tone hardly inspiring confidence in his own mental state. For just a second he was distracted. Bernice threw her handbag at him.

It should have cracked him nicely in the head, but he turned just too soon and the bag sailed over his shoulder. The gun was on her. He squeezed hard on the trigger. The handbag smacked against the window behind him. The windows absorbed the shock, bulging slightly outwards, just for a second. Then the storm took them. Glass fragments punched out into the rain and away left. Papers, chairs, anything not bolted down, swept out into the cacophony of the storm. Endwell fired the gun, falling backwards as the shot went

high. He stumbled, trying to keep balance. The storm got him, picked him off the floor. He didn't even have time to scream as he vanished into the darkness.

Bernice grabbed for Ross, and Ross clung fast to the bolted-down furniture. All around them was mayhem. The storm, deafening them, wrenched off Bernice's shoes. They'd been pretty and cost all the money she'd had, but were murder on her feet.

The Doctor sailed across the room, arms and legs windmilling as he tried to find purchase. He passed over Bernice's head as she clung to Ross. A few other men held on to whatever they could, their limbs streaking out behind them toward the torn-open window. The window!

She watched, stricken. The Doctor's hands just caught the frame, bordered with newly broken glass. Blood streaked from the Doctor's palms as he held on. His scream was swallowed up by the gale.

'Cut it off!' Bernice called out to the man clinging to the machine.

He tried to work the controls. A lever came off in his hand. He had just a moment to look at it, dumbfounded. Then he was swept out and away.

Bernice clambered up Ross's arm. Her hair and earrings whipped against her face, yanking at her flesh. She made her way up to the desk, her legs streaming out behind her. This would be tricky.

She leapt off the side of the desk, hurling herself full force towards the door. The air current snatched her as soon as she let go, propelling her to the window. The machine was in the way. She grabbed at it, almost yanking her arms out. Her clothes strained at her.

The controls would not respond. She thumped them. Nothing. Bashing harder dislodged the covering panel. Thick bunches of cables appeared. She wriggled the housing, exposing more wire. Suddenly the housing snapped off, and the shock almost made her lose her grip.

She stared at the differently coloured wires. Where did she start? The red wires, connected to the...

Bernice had seen enough thrillers to know explosive when she saw it.

‘Blue wire!’ the Doctor wailed, his fingers slipping. ‘Cut the blue wire!’ The contents of his pockets were clattering out into the air.

Bernice tore at the machine’s innards. The blue wire came away in her hand. There was a sudden, terrible silence.

With one last great splap!, the rain stopped.

The Doctor heaved himself over the window frame. He crashed forward into the room, tumbling over himself like a clown. He cradled his messy hands. The men on the floor got slowly to their feet.

‘Nothing to it,’ said Bernice, hitching her dress up. ‘Where’d you get to?’

‘Rush hour,’ rasped the Doctor. ‘You look nice.’

‘Had to go to a dinner,’ she said, dusting herself down. ‘Ross thought we should look the part.’

‘Hello, Ross,’ said the Doctor. ‘Benny, cut the green wire, too.’

Bernice reached into the machine and tugged the green wire free. It fizzed as it broke.

‘Done.’

The Doctor struggled painfully to his feet. ‘We’ve got about a minute,’ he said.

The explosion hurried after them down the stairs. Two of the had-been terrorists carried Ross between them. Bernice followed close

behind, her arms around the Doctor. He had tears in his eyes. His hands were terrible to see.

‘I like the dress,’ he said, his voice barely a whisper.

‘You said to get noticed.’ She nodded at Ross in front of her. ‘He noticed me.’

‘You pooled what you knew…’

‘And followed Endwell when he left. Piece of cake.’

‘You did good, Benny. I’m sorry if you’ve been up all night.’

‘Hey,’ she said, taking his arm carefully, ‘all part of the job.’

They left Ross with the security guard at reception, already on thenphone to the police. The Doctor and Ross knew each other, of course. Ross Brimmicombe-Wood was with UNIT. And he was spoken for. Dammit.

She and the Doctor made their way outside, into the carnage and sunshine. ‘You found him, then?’ said Bernice, binding the Doctor’s hands with his tie. He wouldn’t wait for the ambulance.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor.

‘And was he a nutcase?’

‘That’s not the term we use now is it, Benny? He’s certainly a troubled individual. He didn’t want any of this, though. His machine scared him. That’s why he told me how to stop it. He called them insane.’ He gazed at the men around them, the men who had beaten her and Ross, who had nearly destroyed the city. They looked lost, now.

‘They wanted to make things better,’ Bernice said. ‘For people to see what they’re doing to the planet. Endwell was an expert on climate change, and no one was listening.’

‘Drastic solutions,’ said the Doctor. He seemed about to say something more. But the men had his attention.

They were picking up the litter strewn everywhere across the road. It seemed so pointless, there being so much of it. She couldn’t see corpses, though, and had a grisly thought of dead militants dropped all down Whitehall and the Embankment. She watched the men work, supposing it meant they were doing something, keeping busy, making some kind of amends. A thought struck her.

‘It’s this, isn’t it? The little acts of kindness. That’s what really makes things better.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Who knows what difference we make in the end,’ he said, turning to her. ‘But, Benny, it’s not always the end that’s important.’

‘No,’ she said. She and the Doctor headed off to find the TARDIS. Behind them, the bloody-nosed terrorists worked to clear the street.

Short Trips: Solar System

When I was growing up I read books voraciously (something I'm ashamed to say I don't do now). Kipling, Christie, Hardy, Wilkie Collins - loved 'em all. But even as I went through my teens I was always drawn back to those books rd loved as a child - Allison Uttley, Gwynedd Rae, Terrance Dicks... but the one genre I never really liked (nor do I now) is science fiction/fantasy. Except for one author who absolutely inspired me to want to write. Walter Hughes who, under the not terribly imaginative pseudonym of Hugh Walters, (no, not the actor) wrote a series of marvellous books about space explorers who bounced from planet to planet in such books as Mission to Mercury, Nearly Neptune, Journey to Jupiter and so forth. A little way into the run of books he added a teenager into the mix of adults, a young stowaway called Tony Hale and to my eight/ nine/ten year-old mind, Tony was the most aspirational character ever.

So when it came time to do another Short *Trips* anthology, I knew I wanted to do something akin to Hugh Walters, a series of Doctor Who stories, very pulpy, where science was not especially relevant but instead were darned good adventures throughout our solar system.

As the book came together, we seemed to drift away from that outrageously fun romp and move more towards more traditional Doctor Who stories, but set on each of the planets (yes, in those days Pluto was still a planet!), all wrapped inside another lovely cover by Stuart Manning. Stuart was also keen to flex his writer muscles and I knew he could do this simply cos we'd spent hours bashing around ways to improve, change and distort beyond all reason various Doctor Who audio plays. And we were beginning to discuss things like the Dark Shadows range, which Stuart went onto write and produce for Big Finish, so I thought OK, give him a chance to do one of these short stories. It was a good move and thus we ended up with the dark and poignant Venus, featuring "my" team, the Eighth Doctor and Charley, characters I'd invested a lot of time in and always loved seeing new ways different writers saw

them

This then is Venus - not at all pulpy or hokum science fiction at all, just a damned good story.

Gary Russell

Venus
Stuart Manning

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor,
with Charlotte Pollard

Charley Pollard looked up appreciatively, watching the shifting bands of colour float above her silently. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she finally managed.

The Doctor leaned forward from his armchair and poured himself another cup of tea. ‘Beautiful, but deadly,’ he smirked indulgently, Meeting her gaze through the steam of his drink.

The Doctor was in the mood to hold court, and Charley was only too willing to provide him with an audience. At first glance, he was a dashing figure with flowing brown hair and elegant clothes, yet a streak of schoolboy recklessness shone through the facade. She was his companion, a self-proclaimed ‘Edwardian Adventuress’ who had found in his footsteps all the adventures she could ever have wished for. Tonight, however, was an exception - a rare opportunity to relax in the antique-damn haven of the TARDIS and enjoy one other’s company.

Charley’s eyes drifted upwards again. It felt warm and secure inside the chip’s cavernous control room. Conversely, the greyness of the sight Above her conjured up memories of smoggy winters back on Earth, and Ike ghostly sounds of a crackling fire danced around her ears. Where the control room’s rusted iron girders should have reached the ceiling, there was instead only the swirling slate grey expanse of the sight outside. This was the TARDIS scanner; a projected window to the world outside the time machine.

The Doctor seemed oblivious to its spectacle, but it was a piece of trickery Charley had never quite adjusted to. Whether instinctively darting into the shade to avoid non-existent rain, or flinching at the sight of a racing meteor, the scanner’s images always seemed a little too real to trust.

The Doctor watched his companion impatiently, his head propped up against the threadbare velvet cuff of his jacket. He fixed her with his sharp grey eyes and repeated, more insistently: ‘Beautiful, but deadly.’

Charley smirked back at him, pushing her blonde fringe from her eyes. ‘Am I supposed to react?’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he protested.

‘Beautiful but deadly, indeed!’ she snorted. ‘You and the TARDIS are a pair of frightful old hams!’

A flash of feigned hurt. ‘It is beautiful though, isn’t it?’ beamed the Doctor.

She nodded. ‘Indeed it is. But deadly?’

The Doctor tilted his head slightly and gave a measured pause before whispering: ‘Beauty can be a deadly thing. Do you know where we are?’

‘You said it was local to me, though I doubt it’s Knightsbridge,’ she replied drily.

‘Local in a manner of speaking. You’re looking down on the planet Venus.’

She looked surprised: ‘It looks so peaceful.’

‘A peaceful sight indeed. And that peaceful sight is a raging storm of sulphuric acid.’

‘Beautiful but deadly,’ she rolled her eyes, playing along. ‘All right, I see your point.’

The Doctor sipped his tea and leaned back, his chair creaking slightly. ‘Venus was a goddess of arts, love and beauty - a beguiling combination and an apt name indeed. Her surface consumed by

ever- churning storm clouds, she reached out to embrace those men who first walked amongst the heavens.'

Charley drew her heavy jumper close around her, sensing the prickling of a draught. The Doctor's gaze shifted slightly, and a smile flickered across his mouth as he noticed her move. 'For Venus seemed almost alive, and those few who survived her gaze deemed her a warning to the curious. Legends abound of those bewitched by her beauty and then drawn into her atmosphere.'

His voice dropped to a whisper as he craned his head closer: 'Drawn to her atmosphere, before being sucked into the depths and vaporised by searing heat.'

His performance completed, he slammed his cup and saucer down triumphantly, gleefully noticing her flinch.

'Then... then why do people visit, if it's so dangerous?' demanded Charley, not to be beaten.

'Very astute, Miss Pollard,' conceded the Doctor, thoughts darting across his face as he considered her question. 'People continued to visit, however.' He clasped his hands together and tapped his chin slightly. 'Yet, like a vengeful goddess, Venus saw off her explorers and would-be colonists. This is a place of superstition, where no man dares to tread.'

Finally he was silent and the only sound left was the crackling of the phantom hearth.

'Frightful old ham!' giggled Charley.

Some time later, when the TARDIS materialised, it might have landed in a forest. Certainly that was Charley's first thought, as the door creaked open and she squinted into the light, adjusting to the new surroundings.

'So where are we, Doctor?'

'Haven't a clue,' echoed the reply from the depths of the ship.

Biting her lip, she glanced around idly. ‘It’s like a sort of glade. I think those are trees.’ She frowned slightly and nodded to herself. Definitely trees. Admittedly, she wasn’t used to trees with luminous red bark, but they seemed to be trees. And usually trees didn’t bury their roots in shiny polished granite floors, but she felt happy enough with her definition. Yes, these were trees.

‘Very pleasant,’ beamed the Doctor, as he closed the door behind him.

‘It’s like some sort of strange forest,’ whispered Charley, realising how melodramatic that sounded out loud.

‘It must reach up quite a way. Maybe the branches form some sort of canopy?’ said the Doctor, rocking his head slightly as he weighed up the possibility.

‘Didn’t the TARDIS have any clues?’

‘Nope. Somewhere near Venus, I suppose. We haven’t travelled too far from there.’

‘We’re not on the planet then?’ said Charley apprehensively.

‘Oh, no, not at all.’ The Doctor licked his forefinger and held it in the air. ‘A clement evening’s breeze. On Venus that would be enough to strip the flesh from your bones, before pounding them to dust.’

‘How cheery.’

He grinned broadly, oblivious to her sarcasm. ‘Hmmmm... It’s quite a mystery where we’ve landed. Time to explore, I think!’

A forest was a forest, Charley told herself with slight impatience. The Doctor was less easily convinced however, so what should have been a brief stroll had turned into an extended expedition, with him scampering between the trees inquisitively, occasionally producing a random piece of equipment from his pockets to take a reading or

observation.

‘So, the verdict is?’

‘The verdict, Charley, is that things are rarely what they seem,’ he said tersely, putting a twisted metal instrument back into his waistcoat pocket.

‘Well, you must have some idea by now, surely?’ she said pleasantly, hoping that it didn’t sound snappy.

‘Well, my considered verdict is…’ He stuck out his bottom lip petulantly, putting his hands in his pockets.

‘It’s a forest.’

‘Yes,’ came the sheepish reply.

‘But still, it’s a very unusual forest,’ she said kindly.

‘Isn’t it?’ he beamed excitedly, forgetting his disappointment. ‘Stone floors, those strange formations! Yes, it’s quite remarkable.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Charley blandly, wishing he’d reached his conclusion half an hour earlier. ‘One thing though, where does the light come from?’

‘You noticed that?’ he said, impressed. He paused and surveyed the space for dramatic effect. Despite no obvious light source, they could see easily, albeit in a muddy red haze. ‘Well, it doesn’t come from above,’ mused the Doctor, looking up to see the great scarlet boughs reach into the darkness.

‘It’s almost like it’s all around us - like a glow,’ offered Charley.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor slowly, his eyes narrowing. ‘So where are the inhabitants?’

‘What inhabitants?’

‘Exactly!’ he said eagerly, now on a roll. ‘A dead area of space that isn’t, strange glowing orchards with stone floors. Yes, definitely a possibility.’

The sound of a gong echoed around them, resonating through the branches before scuttling into silence.

‘Told you so,’ he nodded sagely.

Charley darted her head around, sensing something lurking on the edge of her vision. The Doctor cocked his head slightly, picking up on her reflex. Without sound, one of the trees seemed to twist into life. Charley blinked and realised that it was the outline of a figure. Definitely human she decided, widening her eyes as she tried to make out more.

And then another. And another. The Doctor turned on his heel, sensing footfalls approaching. There were maybe twenty of them now, each moving forward silently. Charley’s senses prickled as she realised they were surrounded. She clutched the Doctor’s arm, but he seemed quite unfazed, smiling placidly as he waited patiently for the group to approach.

‘Doctor, I really wonder if we should hide?’

Too late. Charley stepped back slightly, but the Doctor seemed to be rooted to the spot. They approached, more distinct as they moved closer. First an elderly woman, tall and elegant, with a silver brooch around her high black collar. Then a man in a striped waistcoat with a kind face and twinkling eyes. Next a child with a sad stare. The Doctor raised a hand to wave, but seemed to think better of it. More and more of them filed by, one by one, each not seeming to notice the Doctor or Charley. Silent, relaxed, but all with the same sense of purpose set into their features.

A few moments later, Charley and the Doctor were standing alone again, both feeling slightly bemused. The Doctor looked at the departing figures, disappearing into the distance. He almost felt insulted - he usually drew a stare at the very least.

‘Curiouser and curiousier.’

‘Don’t be pretentious,’ gloated Charley.

‘A place of the dead, where the living fear to tread,’ he whispered. She pursed her lips. ‘Doctor, this morbid turn of yours today is really quite tiresome. Though they did seem a fairly motley bunch.’

‘Motley indeed. Did you notice the way they seemed not to notice us?’

‘Like they couldn’t see us.’

‘No!’ the Doctor insisted. ‘They definitely saw us. They just didn’t seem interested.’

‘We could follow them,’ Charley suggested helpfully.

Before the Doctor could respond, they were disturbed by the sound of footsteps, this time more urgent and irregular. A woman darted from between a twisted pair of tree trunks, struggling with her earring as she did. Between her frantic tugging and tottering gait, she made for a slightly odd sight, but her hopeful smile towards Charley and the Doctor suggested she was friendly.

‘Oh, thank heavens,’ she gushed dizzily, abandoning her earring and skipping towards them. ‘I thought I’d missed everyone.’

‘We just did,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘Stupid watch stopped, y’see? Always has to happen at the wrong time, doesn’t it?’ The woman was small and timid-looking, at slight odds with her rich red outfit. Charley smiled sympathetically. The woman smiled back self-consciously and Charley guiltily realised she was staring.

‘I know, not my colour is it?’

‘It’s charming,’ said the Doctor. ‘Perhaps we could join you?’ he ingested, flashing a winning smile.

‘Oh, please do!’ she said eagerly, beginning to walk. The Doctor and Charley followed. ‘Well, at least I won’t be the last one there.’

‘We can be fashionably late,’ said Charley, hoping that she hadn’t caused offence.

‘Or just late,’ the woman tugged at a lapel. ‘You really think it’s okay? I mean, this is a pretty swish do. I don’t want to let the side down.’

‘Yes, it should be fun,’ said the Doctor, knowingly guiding the conversation. Charley was impressed at how businesslike he could be when it came to finding his feet amidst a mystery.

‘Truth be told, it’s not really my thing,’ the woman admitted. ‘Kinds posh but, y’know, you have to try new things, don’t you?’

‘An admirable sentiment. I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend Charlotte Pollard.’

The woman looked shocked. ‘You’re not meant to say things like that!’

‘Oh.’ The Doctor looked crestfallen.

‘I mean I don’t understand it myself, but rules is rules,’ she explained warily, embarrassed at his reaction. She looked around her shoulder. ‘Well, since we’re getting personal, I’m Scarlet.’

‘Evidently,’ said Charley, glancing at the woman’s dress and immediately cursing her own tactlessness.

As they wandered slowly through the forest’s gloomy red corridors, Charley found herself growing impatient for the second time that day. Though obviously a decent person, Scarlet’s nervous monologue quickly became deeply grating, made worse by the Doctor’s apparently insatiable enthusiasm to hear more.

‘My husband wouldn’t come with me, you see,’ she yammered,

holding a lipstick to her mouth in anticipation of a pause in her speech that never came. ‘He’d be happier ifI stayed at home forever, I swear. Again and again I told him he’d enjoy it, but he’d rather stay at home and read his paper.’ Her voice lowered as she failed to suppress her excitement. ‘So I snuck out without telling him. Just upped and left!’

‘Oh,’ said Charley, a little too sharply.

Scarlet laughed. ‘He’s probably sitting there waiting for his dinner to be cooked!’

The Doctor’s eyes darted between them.

‘I just saw this opportunity and ran for it, I guess. I mean, probably it’s not my thing but there’s gotta be something about it, to make it worth doing, don’t you think?’ She didn’t wait for a reply. ‘But he just can’t understand it. He’s had the same haircut for forty years; he bought the car his father bought. I swear, given the choice of interplanetary travel or a night in front of the TV, the footy scores win every time.’

‘But you’re a long way from home, surely,’ said the Doctor quizzically.

‘Oh, yeah, I mean that was the point, wasn’t it? Even though this place has been a bit of an adjustment,’ she gestured generally at their surroundings.

‘Still getting used to that,’ lied Charley.

‘I just keep telling myself what an honour it is being here,’ said Scarlet in a forced whisper, gesturing around them. ‘I mean we all thought that when Mr Aristede said he’d retired that was the last of it.’

‘Yes, I’m very much looking forward to meeting Mr Aristede,’ enthused the Doctor. Charley frowned at him, before realising just how efficiently he was sizing up the situation.

‘Yeah, isn’t it exciting? It’s not every day an artist like him announces his farewell exhibition, is it?’

‘Yes, I can’t wait to see it,’ said the Doctor casually. Charley threw him a smirk - she had to admit, he knew how to get results.

‘I think I might be a bit out of my depth,’ Scarlet whispered, even though there was no one to overhear them. ‘I was very surprised when I was invited. I mean you hope, and dream of it, but luck never works out the way you expect, does it?’

‘You’ll be fine,’ said the Doctor, aping her whisper. ‘Anyway, I’m sure Mr Aristede will prove himself a fine host.’

‘Oh, I do hope so,’ she trilled. ‘He sounds fascinating.’

‘So why are you so worried about the reception?’ asked Charley, feeling that she should contribute something to the Doctor’s polite interrogation.

Scarlet tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. ‘Well, y’know I just filled out the form and hoped for the best. And then when the invite arrived - fancy envelope, embossed in silver- I didn’t dare to open it. But,’ she giggled nervously, ‘I knew it was meant to be.’

‘I see,’ said the Doctor pointedly.

‘And to think, he chose me from all those applicants - personally!’
‘I’ve got a golden ticket,’ replied the Doctor, smiling uneasily. Charley didn’t miss the sinister note in his voice.

When they arrived at the gathering, Charley was relieved that their entrance went unnoticed. The mood was more relaxed than she was expecting, with groups of spectators chattering in low voices over drinks.

‘Well, I’m going to go mingle,’ announced Scarlet excitedly. ‘Ta- ta!’

The Doctor waved as she disappeared into the distance. Charley looked around her shoulder and appraised the guests. After the

strange encounter with the group in the forest, she felt instantly suspicious, but the Doctor seemed to have totally forgotten about it. Taking two fluted glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, he handed her the first and wielded the second like an actor with a new prop.

'I think we should take our friend's advice and mingle ourselves,' he decided.

'They didn't seem very friendly earlier.'

'That's a good enough reason to befriend them.'

The Doctor whistled to himself in approval as he looked around the space. Much like the strange forest, it seemed to be woven from the trunks of the leafless red trees, with massive branches closing high above their heads like a giant's handshake. One end of the hall was dominated by a huge set of hanging drapes, while at the other, smaller trees sprouted up to create stairs and walkways. 'A wonderful space, Charley,' said the Doctor, casting an admiring glance. 'But where are the exhibits?'

A severe-looking elderly man in a tweed jacket eyed the pair of them suspiciously. 'I beg your pardon. Did you say exhibits?'

'What else would one expect to see at an exhibition?'

'You do know why you're here?' He looked deeply shocked.

There was an uneasy pause. 'This is very good champagne,' said the Doctor, quickly waving his untouched drink in the air as proof. 'I must declare it's hit me right between the eyes.'

Outraged, the old man looked as if he might do the same.

'Oh, Doctor, fancy you getting squiffy at a time like this!' chided Charley, taking her friend's lead. 'You must excuse him.'

'Indeed I must,' said the man unconvincingly. 'Perhaps you should tend to your addled friend, madam.' And, with a final disapproving

look, he was gone.

‘Pleasant crowd, aren’t they?’ said Charley, taking a sip.

A handful of ignored greetings was enough to dissuade Charley from trying to make friends. Even the Doctor’s attempts to blithely persevere seemed to fail. So it was a relief when the hubbub of conversation was halted by the sound of the gong they’d heard earlier.

‘I think it’s time to meet our host,’ said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together.

‘If he’s anything like his guests, I think I’d rather not.’

The Doctor put a finger to his lips, before pointing high above them. She looked up and saw the man standing at the top of the highest walkway, leaning against the gnarled barrier. Only then did she sense the rapt attention of his assembled audience.

‘That would be Mr Aristede,’ said the Doctor.

A tiny faraway figure, he still managed to command an instant reaction. Stout, imposing and impeccably dressed. Across the room, Charley saw Scarlet’s mouth drop open. The gentleman took a wobbly step forward, easing his considerable weight onto his ivory walking cane. The crowd rippled slightly with appreciative whispers. Another step forward, this time with more confidence. Charley could now get a clearer view. His face was stern, with a heavy jaw and puffed cheeks. His magnified eyes blazed through the pebble-lenses of his pince-nez, framed by a shining bald scalp. Eccentric certainly, but a charismatic figure nonetheless, Charley decided.

‘My friends,’ his voice echoed, hoarse and rasping, ‘I welcome you to this gathering. Each and every one one of you has been specially chosen to be here tonight.’ Pockets of the audience bristled with pride. ‘Our mission is to conquer a vengeful goddess. Legends tell of her dangerous beauty, warning mortal man to look but not touch. Today those legends are rewritten!’

With a flourish, Aristede directed the audience's gaze towards the huge set of red curtains that dominated the space, like a theatre proscenium imbedded into the matted foliage. With a curt nod, he gestured to his assistants, who moved to open the stage with well-rehearsed precision. Charley arched her neck to get a better view. As the drapes slid open, a stream of grey light forced itself through the gap, playing across the anxious faces of the audience.

There was an appreciative intake of breath as the curtain fell to the sound in a dance of billowing silk, unveiling the sight beneath. At first Charley thought it was a huge canvas, grey and blank, but as she looked, she was aware of the slightest flow of movement. Familiar and alien at the same time, in an instant Charley knew what she was looking at.

'Venus,' breathed the Doctor.

At first it had been a pale block cut into her vision, but then the image seemed to take form, like smoke dissipating on a breeze. Almost too pale to see, at first, but now there was definite movement. Slight stripes of shade stroked from left to right, drifting lazily along, like oil on a puddle. It was strange and disorientating, like an ocean of milky water, but the calm and scale of the sight was curiously welcoming. A sleepy feeling of peace weighed on her eyelids, and for a moment she felt like she would happily float away into its pallid depths.

A sharp jolt, and she was back in reality. The Doctor was holding her hand, looking wary. 'Did I startle you?'

His words tingled through her brain as she shook away her disorientation.

'Sorry, I was distracted.'

'So I see,' said the Doctor, scowling as a woman behind him made hushing sounds.

'Is it like the TARDIS scanner?' whispered Charley. The woman

once again hissed in distaste at the disturbance.

‘After a fashion,’ said the Doctor, sounding unsure.

Aristede teetered along a walkway in front of the planet’s vista, a stick figure against a mass of sliding clouds. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the planet Venus!’ He bowed with surprising grace, and the room rang with the sound of clapping.

‘So that’s his artwork?’ frowned Charley. ‘Like some sort of moving painting?’

The Doctor’s brow furrowed and he shook his head. ‘No, I don’t think so. I think it is the planet.’

‘He’s created a planet?’

‘Maybe. It’s as likely a possibility that we’d be standing in a spaceship made of wood, en route to viewing it.’

‘We’re on a spaceship?’ she looked sceptical.

‘Unusual decor, but, yes - that little display proves it. Definitely a spaceship.’

‘Is that a good or a bad thing?’ By now he was far too lost in his thoughts to give her a clue either way.

‘I don’t know. Which is why you and I should go and say hello.’

His speech completed, Aristede had descended to the floor to join his guests. Thankfully most of them seemed too awestruck to approach, keeping a respectful distance from their host. The ersatz window cast a sickly hue across the gathering, as the approaching Venus made her presence felt. The Doctor and Charley watched from a short distance, waiting to make their move.

‘We don’t seem to be having much luck making friends,’ she said glumly.

‘It’ll be fine - I’ll find the right moment to subtly join their conversation.’

Sidling up to eavesdrop, the Doctor waited patiently for his cue.

‘And so,’ growled Aristede to his companions, ‘my exhibition of ‘62 was disbanded for the war effort and -’

‘Good grief!’ the Doctor gasped.

Charley cringed in embarrassment. Aristede and his entourage turned their heads in confusion and observed the Doctor. With incredulous looks, they looked him up and down, before turning away with distaste.

‘Every last item harvested for parts,’ continued Aristede sadly. ‘Amazing!’

‘Doctor!’ growled Charley, becoming aware of the circle of curious eavesdroppers forming around then.

‘Charley, the floor is moving!’ he exclaimed, hopping from foot to foot in excitement.

‘Of course the floor is moving, sir,’ replied Aristede tersely, turning to face the Doctor.

‘Good heavens!’ Charley dropped her glass in shock. ‘It *is* moving.’

‘No,’ squealed the Doctor gleefully, ‘breathing! The floor is breathing!’

‘Naturally,’ said Aristede, almost making it seem natural. ‘It’s wonderful! Tell me, how?’

Aristede scowled at Charley, as if asking her to explain the Doctor’s disarming enthusiasm. She was still preoccupied with tip-toeing uncomfortably, wary of where to put her feet, but managed a feeble smile.

‘Have you suffered a blow to the head, sir?’

‘Humour him,’ mouthed Charley.

‘The creature should die if it didn’t breath. Does that not make sense?’ The whites of his eyes distorted grotesquely through the lenses, punctuating his rhetoric.

‘Of course, it’s alive!’ The Doctor grabbed Charley in a whirlwind of enthusiasm. ‘Isn’t that wonderful, Charley? This room... everything around us is alive!’

‘Oh. Great,’ said Charley lamely.

‘It must measure miles across!’

‘Indeed it does sir, specially bred for our mission,’

‘Must have been a huge petri dish,’ laughed the Doctor.

The corners of Aristede’s mouth lifted slightly, but his eyes remained Kern.

‘We’re standing inside a creature?’ asked Charley, looking queasy.

‘Our craft and our host,’ said Aristede impressively.

‘Amazing! A giant creature swimming through space - what bliss!’

The Doctor danced a little jig of excitement and laughed again.

‘The belly of the beast, sir!’ chimed in Aristede.

‘Quite so! That explains your red forest, Charley - capillaries and veins! I can’t believe I didn’t realise sooner.’

‘Your sickness shows in your disorientation, sir.’ Aristede still looked cautious, but seemed now satisfied that this babbling fop was harmless. After all, an audience was an audience.

‘Nobody’s perfect,’ the Doctor shrugged. ‘So, how’s that done?’ He pointed at the square window Venus peered through.

‘One of our cruder adaptations, but effective nonetheless. Merely our boat’s optic nerve diverted from its path.’

The Doctor nodded like an eager student. ‘And the creature’s drive? Brain control?’

‘Quite right sir. You seem to be regaining your senses.’

‘I misplace things all the time.’

Aristede proffered his carved ivory walking cane: ‘The beast’s tooth!’ He smiled proudly. ‘Well, a modest part of one.’ The Doctor smiled politely, but did not accept the object.

Charley felt distinctly seasick. Much as the thrill of adventure seemed appealing in principle, the rush of this discovery was proving to be something of a culture shock.

‘Doctor, this is absurd,’ she began.

‘Superbly so,’ he agreed.

‘Plain silly,’ she added.

‘Absurd? Yes... Silly? No! It makes perfect sense. Think of it - a trip to Venus. This visit will bring these people into contact with temperatures hot enough to melt lead, crippling pressure, clouds of acid. That’s not a problem for technology to fix - let nature solve it.

‘But it’s preposterous,’ scoffed Charley. ‘How can any animal survive all that heat and pressure?’

‘And acid,’ he reminded her.

‘That too!’

‘Life finds a way,’ answered the Doctor, with total faith.

‘And it doesn’t mind being... being infested?’

‘Think of yourself as a well-behaved flea,’ whispered the Doctor conspiratorially, enjoying her stunned response. ‘An itch here, a scratch there, but otherwise it hasn’t got a clue we’re aboard.’

Charley looked around her shoulder gingerly, suddenly aware of how rhythmic the breeze against her skin was. *Breathing in, breathing out.* The Doctor seemed to view her apprehension with positive delight, and every time she tried to return his smile, her expression set like concrete.

‘And it’s safe?’

‘Probably.’

‘Andjust suppose it happens to open its mouth unexpectedly?’

The Doctor casually tapped his fingertips together. ‘Well, I suppose we’d be sucked out,’ he answered cheerily.

‘Sucked out?’

He nodded with pantomime concern. ‘Let’s hope you don’t make it ticklish.’ And letting a snort of laughter escape, he scampered off in a blur of velvet.

‘My jester will sit beside me,’ announced Aristede, tapping a chair at the head of the table.

The Doctor accepted the invitation graciously, as he still had unanswered questions. Charley sat beside him, unsure of the Doctor’s newfound favour with the old man. With remarkable speed, the servants had arranged a long snaking table for a meal, large enough to seat everyone who had gathered. The people bustled to find their seats, while all the time, glowing from its window, the grey curve ofVenus tilted down towards them. Aristede stood at the head of the gathering, as the long line of eager faces twisted uncomfortably to watch him.

‘Tonight Venus shall surrender her secrets,’ he croaked. ‘Sounds and smells and colours that no man before could chance upon and live. Goddess Venus shall speak to those of us gathered here tonight.’ A young man at the front of the table shifted awkwardly. Aristede turned his head and fixed him with his unblinking stare. ‘Through her voice, we shall experience that which no man or woman has ever experienced before. A blissful split second of utter enlightenment,’ he paused and took in a deep breath, savouring his contrived anticipation. ‘And then peace!’ He spread his arms triumphantly as rapturous applause rang around the room.

Charley and the Doctor were the only ones not to clap.

‘What does he mean?’ said Charley urgently.

The Doctor shushed her impatiently, raising his voice to address Aristede. ‘We’ve not discussed your exhibit, Aristede.’ The Doctor held his butter knife in his hands, flipping it back and forth as he spoke. Charley sensed the arch lilt in his voice.

‘My jester speaks,’ said the old man, managing a hacking laugh. ‘My exhibit is a journey into the greatest canvas the Solar System has to offer,’ her replied grandly.

‘So you said,’ agreed the Doctor, tucking a napkin into his collar casually. ‘But what use is a canvas with nothing painted on it?’

‘Your logic is impeccable, Doctor, even if your memory fails you,’ said Aristede quietly checking his pocket watch. ‘Much like the production of our cooperative friend,’ he gestured to the room around them knowingly, ‘in my old age, I prefer to leave the execution to my employees.’

He leaned back in his chair and watched the surface of Venus keenly. The first spark of light reflected in the Doctor’s sad grey eyes. A pinprick of energy cracked through the placid cloud layers of the planet, allowing a thin streak of darkness to burst through, smearing across its surface like a tear tracing down a cheek. The Doctor looked away as a second disturbance broke through.

The audience predictably applauded again.

‘Doctor, what are they?’ asked Charley, though she already knew the answer. A childhood of cinema newsreels played through in her head in a split second - some things never changed that much. She knew a bomb when she saw one.

‘Bombs,’ confirmed Aristede proudly.

‘Yes, bombs,’ scowled the Doctor. ‘Crude bombs, scrawling their debris across the planet’s surface. So that’s your great achievement, Aristede?’ The Doctor’s glare was as cold as his voice. ‘It doesn’t seem very accomplished to me.’

‘Engineered storms that will rage across the planet’s surface for a thousand years! For so long I dreamed of a canvas worthy of my designs.’

‘Or your ego?’

‘You have a sharp tongue for an invited guest, sir.’

‘Isn’t that the problem with art, though? Everyone’s a critic.’

Aristede held his arms wide to the crowd, clearly relishing playing to an audience. ‘What does any artist attempt to do, but mark their place in time and space? To endure, to last! Think of it - we shall step into the biggest artwork in history, painted on the biggest canvas!’

‘Perhaps you could detonate a sponsor’s message as well?’ suggested the Doctor innocently.

‘You are quite the wit, my little jester,’ said Aristede, his bitter tone making it clear that he thought nothing of the sort. ‘In my humble opinion - though I concede that very little about me is humble - my little exhibit is a victimless crime.’

‘Which brings me neatly to my next question,’ replied the Doctor,

his outrage suddenly replaced with calm and reason. ‘You said that we’d step into the canvas, so I assume that your little jaunt isn’t a drive-by?’

The old man frowned. ‘Your words are so strange, Doctor. Some would say the ramblings of a madman, though clearly you are not.’ His eyes narrowed to slits as he toyed with the idea. ‘We will step into the canvas and begin our new lives.’

‘You might be able to engineer a beast of burden to make your journey for you, but it’ll never survive flying into the eye of your storms.’

‘That does not concern me.’

‘It should! Many have tried before you, and all were lured to their deaths,’ the Doctor warned sharply.

Aristede sneered. ‘They were mistaken. Venus is a planet of the dead. The living have no business there. But we are different. Life is doomed by Venus’ guiles, but in death we will be triumphant. In death we will conquer, spreading our mark across the planet for centuries to come.’

‘In death?’ the Doctor asked urgently.

‘But of course,’ wheedled Aristede. ‘My final work.’

‘You’re going to crash the ship?’ The Doctor jumped to his feet, his palms pounding on the wooden table as he leaned forward. Aristede looked confused, unsure if this was a question.

‘The exhibit,’ he agreed.

Closer than ever, the first violent black slash across Venus’ surface seemed to have twisted itself into a sinister smile. The Doctor gave Aristede a pitying look and raised his voice to the crowd, which now rippled with sounds of concern.

‘I want you to listen,’ he commanded. ‘I can save you all - I have a

ship onboard and I can ferry you to safety.' Silence.

Charley looked at the Doctor, urging him to do something.

'Don't you understand? This is a suicide mission!'

The final words faded in his throat when he saw the response. There was a brief awkward silence, before the group politely ignored him. Not to be beaten, the Doctor repeated himself. 'I said, this is a suicide mission.'

The same response.

'Well, don't you care?' cried Charley, leaping to his defence. 'Do you want to die?'

An elegant figure midway along the table stood up. A woman wrapped in a patterned shawl with a flash of white running through her auburn hair. 'Of course we want to die,' she said reasonably, in a kind voice. 'That's why we're here.'

Charley looked around her and turned to the Doctor, his expression frozen in brittle shock. 'I'm beginning to understand,' he whispered.

Charley saw the cloud of sadness that crossed his features and instantly felt like she was sinking. She twisted in agitation, as thoughts danced through her head in panic. The red-haired woman fixed Charley with a maternal smile. 'Come sit with us, child and join our meal. We're united by the plague.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'The one thing you all have in common.'

Charley backed away instinctively. 'Plague?'

The Doctor shook his head slightly to reassure her. 'It's fine, Charley - long after your time. They called it a plague, but it wasn't really. Nothing more than an evolutionary dead end, ticking away, waiting to strike.'

'And that's why they were all chosen,' said Charley, her voice

cracking. ‘People who wouldn’t care that this was a one-way trip.’

The Doctor placed his arms behind his back and looked up at the planet’s pock-marked surface, while addressing the crowd. ‘And so rather than wait for death to come, you all decided to pay her a visit and make your mark.’

The sour man in the tweed jacket from the reception leaned forward and coughed gruffly. ‘If there’s a chance to see something no other man can see, then it’s worth it,’ he said, with visible restraint. A few people around him nodded defiantly.

‘You’re willing to die for the hope of seeing a single image?’ Charley scanned the faces in disbelief, vainly looking for a hint of empathy.

Aristede sat low in his chair, his bottom lip trembling as he searched for words. ‘The hope of doing something no one else has ever done before. There are people who would give anything to be here.’

‘These people have,’ said the Doctor sadly. ‘I hope they did it for something better than your reputation.’

‘A worthy bargain to see the most beautiful image in the Solar System,’ rasped Aristede, his eyes widening behind the lenses of his pince-nez.

‘A price these people are willing to pay?’ He turned to the crowd indignantly. ‘Well, are you?’ he demanded.

‘I want to go,’ said a meek voice finally. It was the boy Charley had seen in the forest, still staring his sad stare.

‘So do I!’ said another voice.

Aristede nodded piously to his supporters, before turning to the

Doctor. Finally though, the gloating look of triumph was gone from his face.

‘But isn’t there more for you all?’ said Charley.

‘It’s more than I’ve ever done,’ said a familiar timid voice. Charley looked down at Scarlet through watery eyes and realised that she was defeated. The Doctor cut in and spared her the scrutiny of the onlookers.

‘So you all gave up everything to be here?’

Aristede held his head up proudly. ‘We renounce our names, our pasts and our home.’

‘For a dead world?’ urged the Doctor.

‘We are the dead. This is our planet, Doctor, and we claim it as our own.’

The Doctor was silent. He looked over Aristede’s shoulder where the membrane showed Venus’ glowing mass, staring balefully over them like an unblinking eye.

The Doctor took a deep breath, removed the napkin from his collar, leaving it neatly folded on the table. Finally, he stepped forward and shook the old man’s hand firmly.

‘Then claim it.’

Aristede nodded slightly, resting his hands on top of his cane.

Charley frowned in disbelief. ‘Doctor?’

The Doctor’s stillness felt like a betrayal. He looked down. She sniffed slightly and fought back the stinging of the tears in her eyes. The Doctor tried to place his hand on her shoulder to comfort her, but seemed unable to do so.

Charley looked sullenly at Scarlet, who suddenly seemed to look paper-thin beneath her gaudy outfit.

‘You’ll never arrive,’ she said finally.

‘We might.’

Charley stared at her more urgently. ‘But you’ll never see the planet’s surface! You’ll never see anything.’

The colour seemed to fade from Scarlet. ‘But I might,’ she said blankly.

Charley opened her mouth, but no words came. A roomful of sad faces looked at her - some with confusion, some with pity. She felt the gentle grasp of the Doctor’s hand closing around her shoulder as he led her away and the crowd parted silently to let them pass.

Hours later, they were sat in the nook of one of the trees, legs dangling over the edge as they watched the mass of expectant people waiting silently below. In a few short hours the journey would be over, and uneasy stillness had replaced the gentle wash of chatter. An unseen baby cried its low cry, before being quickly cooed back to silence.

‘So that’s it?’ Charley asked finally.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor replied, without looking at her.

‘I keep trying, but I just don’t understand.’

He nodded slowly, turned to look at her and gestured ahead. Now closer than before, the planet’s surface suddenly seemed alive. Charley’s eyes widened, as huge dark stormy spots erupted through the smooth yellowing horizon like ink on blotting paper. The light danced across her face as she tried to speak. The Doctor gave her a broad smile.

‘Blots on the landscape,’ she whispered to herself. The Doctor shot her a quizzical look. ‘It looks like a piece of blotting paper,’ she said, smiling as she considered the notion.

‘Each of those blots is a storm a thousand miles across,’ he whispered with typical understatement. ‘Do you see the ripples?’

She frowned slightly, watching as dirty grey waves of disturbance rippled silently across the surface like raindrops on the surface of a pond. And then she saw the pinprick of shadow their vessel cast upon the planet.

'It is beautiful,' she admitted.

'Even the most obscene acts can produce something beautiful,' he nodded. 'Now do you see?'

'No, I don't.'

'Would you ever see this sight on a sheet of blotting paper?'

She shook her head sullenly, watching the seeping rivers of black painting veins across Venus' perfect marbled surface.

She turned to face him and managed a businesslike, clipped smile. 'No. I wouldn't.'

'The human urge to explore is a remarkable thing, Charley. For most creatures time moves so slowly that it's barely a breeze. Yet humans cling onto it like a kite in a gale and don't let go!' His eyes grew wider: 'Land, oceans... *heavens!* You understand that there's always more to see, more to do.'

'Do we?'

He placed a hand on her shoulder. 'That's what you did.'

She looked down. That was a long time ago now - a personal dare that had changed everything in a few short hours. Sneaking out to drink, discovering a surprising flair for card games, stealing a uniform before stowing away on that massive airship where she first met the Doctor... She remembered the pounding of her adrenalin, the thrill of those split- second decisions sparking off around her like firecrackers, and of not wanting that night to ever end. Perhaps it never had? Maybe not the adventure she expected, but definitely the one she would have chosen.

‘It was worth it,’ she beamed.

‘Good,’ said the Doctor, hopping down from his perch to the ground, before offering a hand to help Charley down.

As she landed with a thud, she looked at the crowd, the figures now cowering shadows against the planet’s tumbling storm clouds.

‘Do you think they’ll find what they’re looking for?’

‘How so?’

Charley shrugged sadly: ‘Myths of men lured to leave their homes by a living planet - all magic and mystery. But it’s all just chemicals and rocks.’

‘There are worse things to believe in.’

‘But it’s not real.’

‘That’s why Venus isn’t a lure, Charley. A place ofmyth, legends and beguiling mystery undoubtedly, but these people are drawn by nothing more sinister than curiosity.’ He levelled his gaze at her and smiled a private smile. She turned away and they began to walk back towards the TARDIS.

‘Satiable curiosity?’

The Doctor took her hand: ‘Do you think you’ll ever stop dreaming?’ At last, that answer seemed enough. Holding hands, off they walked to

the familiar blue box, nestled in the shade of the red orchard, ready for a new adventure.

Short Trips: The History of Christmas

My clever wife must have handed me a copy of Matthew Sweet's book Inventing the Victorians at some point in 2003. It's a lively, funny debunking of the myths and misconceptions we have of that period and chock full of top facts. I thought idly of nicking some of them for my own stories. But I never did.

Then, in September 2004, I spotted Matthew's name in the Big Finish production office. He'd submitted an idea for a Doctor Who audio play about a chatty pig and the works of Marcel Proust. Then-supremo Gary Russell was trying to decide if it was meant as a joke.

I said I'd enjoyed Matthew's book and Gary commissioned what would become The Year *of* the Pig. I remind Matthew of this fact quite often.

On Friday, 1 April 2005, Ian Farrington commissioned me to edit a book of Doctor Who Christmas short stories. We agreed details over lunch in the pub, him explaining all the things I couldn't do. No, I couldn't do a Doctor Who version of A Christmas Carol because the ninth Doctor would be meeting Charles Dickens himself in just eight days' time. The Big Finish licence doesn't allow us to mention stuff from the new series.

So instead I suggested a Christmas story just set in Victorian times - after all, the Victorians invented Christmas. Some kind of lively, funny debunking of the myths and misconceptions we have of that period and chock full of top facts. For some reason, I thought Matthew might be a good person to write it.

Ian agreed, having seen Matthew on the telly just the previous week, interviewing Mark Gatiss about the ninth Doctor meeting Charles Dickens. It almost felt like the sinister hand of fate.

(Only when the book had been published and Matthew and I actually met in person did we discover we are neighbours.)

Simon Guerrier

The Lampblack Wars
Matthew Sweet

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,
with Sarah Jane Smith

It was the corset that bothered Sarah Jane Smith - and not just because it had been a two-person job. She'd expected the Doctor to leave her to it, but no - he hadn't shown the least sign of embarrassment as he laced the thing around her waist, fussing and flapping and singing *Jolly Good Luck to the Girl Who Loves a Soldier* in his best Palace-of- Varieties baritone.

'I suppose you wear a lot of frilly things yourself,' she'd said, willing herself not to blush.

The Doctor's appearance had only required the smallest adjustments to comply with the sumptuary codes of nineteenth-century London: the bottle-green smoking jacket, the Adam Adamant cape, the shirt with two strips of embroidered lace escorting the buttons up to his monstrous collar - these alone would have allowed him to pass for a minor Pre-Raphaelite. His physical features - the flurry of Arctic curls, the fuzzy sideburns, the prodigious nose, strong as a dodo's beak didn't detract from the image. And now that the TARDIS wardrobe had furnished him with a velvet-lined topper and a silk tie to match his jacket, perhaps, thought Sarah Jane, he looked a bit *too* Victorian. Perhaps people would think he was taking the mickey.

The TARDIS had washed up under one of the arches of Covent Garden market. Stallholders were packing away their crates. Boys were sweeping up stray cabbage leaves and spirals of discarded orange peel. A dog nosed around with a disappointed air, as if he wished he'd gone to Smithfield. Sarah took a lungful of pleasantly frosty air. 'So what's there to do on a Saturday night in Victorian London?' she asked. 'Besides staying in to read religious tracts and listen to the lady of the house playing Schubert?'

The Doctor closed the police box door behind him. ‘You’ve watched too much costume drama on television, Sarah Jane. Staying-in scenes are cheap. All you need is a pianoforte, a few nice frocks and Nyree Dawn Porter. They never show you what Victorians really got up to at night. How about a trapeze show? Or a play about Derby Day with six live horses on a conveyor belt, galloping away like bllly-o?’

He bowled out over the cobbles, lifted a copy of *The Times* from the hands of a newspaper vendor, and scanned the front page. Sarah fumbled in her bag for a coin and pressed it into the boy’s hand. The alacrity with which the lad scuttered down the street suggested that she had picked the wrong denomination.

‘What takes your fancy?’ the Doctor demanded. ‘We could go for a curry in Berkeley Square. I think Dean Mohammed’s place is still open - or perhaps he’s downshifted to Brighton by now and become a masseur. We could take the train down to Sydenham and catch Blondin. If we’re lucky we might see him pushing a lion across the highrope in a wheelbarrow. Or the business with the kitchen stove... ‘ The Doctor’s eyes glazed with pleasure. ‘I was there, you know, when he tried that trick for the first time. He wheeled his little cooker across the rapids at Niagara Falls, cracked an egg into his pan and whisked up an omelette - a hundred feet over our heads! Then he lowered the pan down to a steamboat chugging away in the rapids. There was a terrific fight for a piece of the thing. People grabbed for scraps, but didn’t know whether to eat them or take them home as souvenirs.’

‘Did you get some?’ asked Sarah.

‘Of course.’

‘And?’

‘Well, he was no Escoffier.’

Sarah took the newspaper, peered at the date under the masthead, and read it aloud: 14 December 1861. The Doctor, who was halfway through a bow to an elderly passer-by, spun round and stared at the

front page over his companion's shoulder. He rubbed the back of his neck with the palm of his hand.

'We'd better decide quickly,' he said. 'In a few hours, entertainment will be rather hard to come by.'

Mary Prout had money in her purse. And something that was better than money. She pulled the drawstring and slipped a hand inside. Her skin made contact with a nest of cool silver. That reassured her. Then she dug her fingers below the layer of coins until they touched an object of a different kind. A small glass bottle with a metal stopper. A cosy heat pulsed inside, as if someone had filled it up with glowing charcoal. But no one had done any such thing, and Mary Prout knew it. She felt the warmth rise through her fingertips, her hands, her arms, her shoulders, her neck. It felt good. It felt like Christmas.

Mary slipped from the pavement and pushed the door of a chophouse on the corner of Mercer Street. The proprietor had his ledger open on the counter, and was busy crushing tiny figures into the ruled columns. When he clocked Mary settling herself on a stool at the bar, he flipped the book shut, slid towards her, pulled a towel from his shoulder and gave the mahogany a brisk buffing.

'Beef Wellington,' she said, tearing off her fur wrap. 'And none of your cat's meat.' The proprietor overplayed his nod of assent. 'And some milky tea. And do me a couple of smokes.' She snapped a shilling on the counter. The proprietor scribbled down her order and thrust the tab through the hatch to the kitchen. Then he pulled a little machine from under the bar, took out his tobacco pouch and a batch of papers, and began, with meticulous care, to roll his best customer a cigarette. She allowed him to place it in her mouth and light the end with a taper. 'The other one's for you, Freddie,' she said. 'Keep us company for a bit.' The proprietor busied himself with the construction of a second cigarette. Mary glanced towards the window - somebody, she noted, had etched a figure on the glass: a choirboy peering over his hymnal with an expression that was far from angelic.

'So, Mary,' ventured Freddie, licking along the edge of a fresh

paper. ‘Aren’t you pining for those early morning rides from Surrey? Aren’t you yearning to be dragging watercress out of all that lovely freezing cold water? Don’t you miss that dirty great wicker basket hanging off your arm all day?’ He popped the completed cigarette from the rollers of the machine, and allowed Mary to light it from her own fag.

‘I’m sick for it all,’ she replied. ‘But a private income’s not such a terrible trial. I can do as I please. I’m off to see the pantomime tonight.’

Mary’s order appeared at the hatch. The proprietor pushed it across the counter. She stubbed out her cigarette, gulped down a mouthful of tea and pierced the piecrust with her fork. A little cloud of steam rushed through the broken pastry. ‘The death of an aunt is a terrible thing,’ she declared. ‘Even one you’ve never known. Even one you never really knew existed.’

The proprietor took a final drag. ‘So how did she make her dough, then, this old girl?’

Mary tapped her nose with the blade of her knife. ‘From something none of us can do without,’ she said. ‘Something that tells us what’s happening in the world, something that lets you keep track of what’s in your till, Freddie. Something that lets you read your Bible and says what gee-gees are running at Beverley and what happened next to little Pip Pirrip.’

The proprietor looked blank. Mary filled him in. ‘Ink, Freddie,’ she murmured. ‘Ink.

On the stage of the Drury Lane theatre, twenty live pigs leapt from a row of wicker baskets, and the audience roared its approval.

‘When are they going to dim the house lights?’ asked Sarah.

‘Not until the 1880s at the earliest,’ replied the Doctor, looking at his watch. ‘Wagner was the first person to put the audience in the dark - and he only did it to stop them making eyes at each other during the recitative. At this point in the nineteenth century they

give you plenty of light to let you read your programme.' He slapped the printed pamphlet into her lap. 'What's the next scene?'

Sarah ran her eyes down the bill. 'A Peep at Turkey. The Topkapi Palace. The Seraglio. A tribute to Mr Grimaldi.' Set in the margin next to these words was a grinning, hairless figure with a beaky nose and monstrous staring eyes.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together with pleasure. 'You'll love this bit.'

Painted scenery flew in from above: wispy pink clouds suspended above oriental domes and spires; pillars denoting the interior of the seraglio. The canvas tableau rippled slightly as it made contact with the boards. A pair of stagehands wheeled a fountain downstage left. Water began to bubble from its spout. Then, to a ripple of delight from the cheap seats, an old clown in a jewelled headdress shuffled into the limelight. He was just like the illustration in the programme: a comic monstrosity shaped from greasepaint and putty. He addressed the audience as if he were talking to them over his garden wall.

'These Turkish foreigners are a different kind of stuff to our English ladies,' he announced. 'For they - bless 'em! - are all pretty *souls,* and don't want for *spirit,* as we all know, when "the grey mare is the better horse" - and if the Ottomy-ladies had but a little *hedification* at Billingsgate, the *flatfish* would soon prove themselves fine *soles* and make it all *hot cockles* with the *muscle* men!'

Laughter streaked through the auditorium. The woman sitting beside, the Doctor gave him the honour of a nudge in the ribs. He turned to Sarah.

'Don't worry. I only got about half of that.'

Sarah sucked her teeth. 'It was smut, though, mainly, wasn't it?' The Doctor nodded. Sarah nodded too, and cast her eyes down to the programme.

What she saw made her catch her breath in horror. The pamphlet

was open on her knee, at the page announcing the appearance of the clown. But the illustration had altered - and was continuing to alter before her eyes. The clown's leer had grown into something truly murderous. It had pulled some kind of sharp instrument from the pocket of its pantaloons, and was now glaring at her from the paper, the sheeny black ink shifting about like the body of some organism glimpsed under a microscope. The clown raised a malignant eyebrow. It stuck out a tarry tongue. It winked. It shifted about on its feet, until it was visible in three-quarter profile. It raised the dagger above its head, and stalked towards the right-hand margin, over which it disappeared, presumably in pursuit ofa victim on the next page.

The Doctor followed Sarah's gaze just in time to see a stockinged foot vanish from view. He picked up the programme and turned the page. The following illustration showed no signs of mobility, but it was utterly grotesque - the clown, its eyes mad with fury, was twisting a knife into the prone body of Widow Twankey.

'Good grief,' breathed the Doctor.

And in the seat immediately behind him, a more demotic phrase passed through the mind of Mary Prout.

Simia the Missing Link sat by the tea urn and rummaged in her reticule for her Christmas card list. Her pencil, poised between her delicately hairy fingers, hovered down the list of names. 'I've an etiquette question,' she declared. 'Chang and Eng. One card or two? What's appropriate for Siamese Twins?'

The green room of the Egyptian Hall was thick with the smell of green tea and cheroot smoke. The last performance was coming to an end, and the turns were having a final drink before returning to their digs. Professor Hemdale spat on one of his dissolving views of the eruption of Mount Etna, and rubbed at the glass lantern slide with a grubby cuff. Miss Hutchinson the Pig-Faced Lady twisted the paper wrapper from a sherbet bonbon, popped the sweet in her mouth and clattered it across the back of her impressive teeth. Bracebridge Hunz, the celebrated zoologist, pored over his notes on the gibbon. Gabriel East, manager of the Sensational Talking Fish,

dug under his fingernails with a teaspoon, and counted the tiles around the fireplace. It was left to Anak, the King of the Giants, an eight-foot Frenchman in a black silk kimono, to answer Simia's question.

'Just the one,' he said, without looking up from his copy of *The Boy Detective.* 'Eng was never much of a reader. I bought them a lovely morocco-bound volume of *East Lynne* for their last birthday, and I don't believe he ever got past the bit where the heroine is mangled up in a train crash.' He paused. 'And then again, as both the brothers are Taoists, perhaps it would be better not to send one at all.'

Simia absorbed this intelligence, and scored the names from her list.

Then her face crumpled to a frown. 'What about Julia Pastrana?' she ventured.

'Roman Catholic,' returned Anak. 'So you're perfectly safe there. But you do know that she's dead?' Simia didn't. Anak told her not to worry. 'That sad fact need not prevent you sending the season's greetings. Her husband had her cadaver perfectly embalmed. Some new Russian process, I believe. Most lifelike.'

Professor Hemdale packed away his slides, poured himself some tea from the urn and consumed the entire cup in one convulsive gulp. This action was swiftly followed by the kind of shudder a man might give after attempting to swallow a brace of live eels - which, coincidentally, was how he had spent much of the early part of his career, in draughty tents and exhibition rooms across the British Isles.

'You'll ruin your stomach, you know,' warned Simia.

'I do know,' snapped Professor Hemdale. 'I'm a professor.' He muttered something disagreeable under his breath.

'Well, I was only saying. Some constitutions won't tolerate it. Miss Hutchinson there, she could stay up all night eating raw lamb chops without suffering the least bit of gastric unpleasantness.' Miss

Hutchinson confirmed that this was true. She had, she professed, once consumed 17 oysters in a month that contained two Rs, and paid no price for it.

But Professor Hemdale was unmoved. ‘Your line of expertise, Miss Simia, is swinging from the parallel bars and discoursing on the Theory of Natural Selection. Mine is vulcanology. I’m not sure whether either of us is qualified to pronounce upon the future of my bowels.’

Simia had no time to respond to this remark. The door flew open, and through it came the junior stage manager, George Evans. He was breathless and pale, and his spectacles magnified his veiny eyes into pools of bloodworms. ‘No show tomorrow night, chaps,’ he breezed. ‘The bells of St Paul’s are ringing.’

Anak put down his magazine. ‘So he’s gone, then?’

Evans nodded gravely.

Gabriel East put down his spoon as a mark of respect.

Simia took up her pencil, and crossed another name from her list. Professor Hemdale raised a teacup. ‘Merry Christmas,’ he muttered, and collapsed into a fit of coughing.

The premises of Charles Goodall and Son were marooned in a gloomy courtyard in Seven Dials. Tallowy light spilled through the windows. Behind the glass, a selection of the firm’s recent work was suspended on lengths of string: a card bearing an image of a robin carrying a sprig of holly in its beak; a penny number of a boys’ serial entitled *Lost in the London Sewers;* an engraving of Madame Vestris as a *sans- culottes.* Although it was nearly midnight, the sound of heavy machinery thrummed through the brickwork. Inside, business was clearly booming.

The Doctor seemed slightly out of his element. ‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘whether it might have been best to go straight to our man in the seraglio? He could be the source of what we saw. Perhaps he does telekinesis as well as dirty jokes.’

‘Maybe he does,’ countered Sarah. ‘And we can go and see him in his dressing room when the show goes down. But as the firm that printed the programme is only around the corner from the theatre, it seems best to start here, doesn’t it?’

The Doctor accepted the logic of the argument and yanked at the bell-pull. A voice from within attempted to answer them over the din of the machinery. Sarah, interpreting this noise as an invitation to enter, pushed open the door.

Inside the print shop, two men were working furiously at an enormous hand-operated press. One slopped ink on to the rollers, the other fed stiff paper into the jaws of the machine. It was demanding work, and they were not prepared to stop for the benefit of visitors.

‘If it’s another job, we can’t do it,’ barked Mr Goodall, senior. ‘We’ve got 17 quires of cartes-des-visites to get through, and the programmes for the Monster Concert at St Gart’s Hospital. And then there’s the Christmas cards for the *Christian Remembrancer.’*

Mr Goodall, Jr, wiped an arm across his face, which left an inky smear on his brow. ‘I blame Gladstone,’ he gasped.

The Doctor, understanding, commiserated. ‘The repeal of the Paper Tax, you mean? All very well to do away with it, but who’s going to print all the stuff, eh?’

Mr Goodall, senior, was pleased that the visitor understood their position. ‘Precisely, sir!’ he exclaimed. ‘If only our clients were so understanding. Two years ago all we did was playing cards. Then the tax on knowledge gets chucked in the scrag bin and we’ve barely been to bed since. Do you know there’s a type famine on? We’ve been down the cellar to break out the old stuff. Some of these cards will have to go out with the long ‘s’ at the end of Christmas. Haven’t used them since I was a boy. Embarrassing, isn’t it? Makes us look like *The Spectator.’*

‘And what about ink?’ asked Sarah. ‘Is there an ink drought?’

Mr Goodall, senior, loosed a dirty chuckle. ‘Not round here, miss. But maybe you’ll find one in the next street. Or in the next one.’

‘You’ve found some way round it, then?’

‘Let’s just say, miss,’ replied Goodall, Jr, ‘that we no longer require the services of the lampblack factory.’

‘Maybe,’ said Goodall, senior, attempting to suppress an attack of hysteria, ‘they’d better close it down and put a plaque on the wall saying, “Charles Dickens worked here.”’ Goodall, Jr, exploded with laughter and lurched backwards into a pile of uncut yellow paper. He only stopped laughing when a young woman in a fur wrap bounded into the shop.

‘Hold the front page, boys,’ she declared. ‘The Prince Consort has retched his last. I reckon you’ll need a drop more of the Everlasting!’ She dipped her hand into her little velvet bag, and pulled out a bottle with a dainty silver stopper. As she did so, Sarah sensed a movement at the window. She turned to see a dark shape sliding up the pane. It was joined by another. And another - until the glass was black with the grinning faces of pantomime clowns.

It was Anak, King of the Giants, who discovered the body of Simia the Missing Link. And this was fortunate, because it was only Anak who had the power to bring her back to life.

Simia was slumped against the door of her dressing room, her bristly knees drawn up to her chest and her arms raised above her head, as though she had attempted to escape an assailant by pushing herself across the floor on her back. Around her body, the unpainted boards were scattered with small rectangular pieces of blank white cardboard.

Anak pulled a carved ivory tube from his carpet bag and used it to listen to her heart. ‘Cardiac seizure,’ he whispered. ‘Excellent. Something in my repertoire.’ He knelt beside her and pressed his palms together in an attitude of prayer. After a few moments he unclasped his hands. A voice drifted up from the street: a

newspaper seller shouting about death and Windsor Castle. A few moments passed in silence. Then, like a bored railway passenger lifting a discarded magazine from the seat, Anak picked one of the blank cards from Simia's body and turned it over in his hand. As he did, the glare of the gaslight picked out an impression on its bleached surface. If he held it at the right angle, he could just pick out a pair of words - 'Merry Christmas!' - and the ghost of a robin, clutching a sprig of holly in its beak.

'What happened to me?'

Simia's eyes had snapped open. She was struggling to raise herself from the floor.

'Nothing that a little drop of hartshorn couldn't cure,' cooed Anak. 'It was the shock of hearing the news about the Prince, I'm sure. What is she going to do without him? What are we all going to do without him?'

Anak helped Simia to her feet, keeping his back bent so as not to smack his head against any of the architraves. As they moved away from the dressing rooms, Simia began to regain her strength - to the extent that when they ran into George Evans, the stage manager scarcely noticed that anything was amiss.

'There's a gentleman to see you, sir,' he gasped, pulling off his spectacles and rubbing them on the front of his shirt. 'No card, but he introduced himself as the Doctor. Looked like he was in the profession.'

'More than one, actually,' trilled the Doctor, appearing behind Evans, and acknowledging Simia with a low bow. 'But I'm here in an amateur capacity tonight. I simply came to return an item of lost property to this gentleman.' The Doctor's eyes darted up and down Anak's body. 'What's that marvellous pudding they make on the Rock Belt of Hextacosulous, Mr Anak? It's so long since I've been.'

Anak's face warmed with a nostalgic glow. 'Doctor, you're a man of taste - despite the evidence of that blouson. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance.'

‘Do you think if we described it to the chef at the Cremorne Gardens that he might be able to whoosh some up for us?’

‘We can try. But I’m not sure that Chelsea has a grocer who would supply you with the milk of a Hextacosulite sand-cow. Not at this hour, anyway.’

At one o’clock on a more customary Sunday morning, the platform at the Cremorne Gardens would have been rattled by two-thousand feet moving to the beat of a Polka Mazurka. Tonight, the floor was bare. The resident orchestra, housed inside a wooden pagoda at the centre of the dance floor, played something slow and reassuring. A few couples wandered quietly under the elms that bordered the lawn. Swells and dodgers in the supper boxes consumed champagne and oysters with sepulchral seriousness. Sarah Jane Smith and Mary Prout sat at their table, watching the coloured gaslights play inside the crystal grotto.

‘When I was a girl,’ said Mary, turning the treasured glass bottle between her fingers, ‘my father brought me here to see Madame Poitevin’s balloon ascent. They dressed her as Europa and sat her on the back of a bull. You should have heard it moo as they burnt up the gas.’ She pressed the bottle against her cheek, enjoying its warmth. ‘Do you think those things will follow me here?’

Sarah gazed across the deserted boards. ‘Depends whether they like oysters.’

The door to the booth opened and in swept the Doctor, Simia and Anak. The giant ducked under the lintel, fixed Mary Prout with a steely stare, and seated himself at the head of the table. The Doctor and Simia took their places either side of him, but said nothing.

‘Mary Prout,’ Anak began. ‘I’m most happy to be reunited with you.

The last time we met you were obliged to leave in a hurry. Shortly after a rummage in my carpet bag, I believe.’ Mary Prout blushed. She set the silver-topped bottle down on the tablecloth.

‘It’s late,’ sighed the giant. ‘But before we all retire to bed, I’d like to tell you a story.’ And he began his narrative. It was, reflected Sarah Jane Smith, the oddest after-dinner speech she had ever heard.

‘There was once a place called Hextacosulous Blue. Its inhabitants had a huge appetite for one thing. War. And when one war had been concluded, the survivors began to prosecute another. And another. And another. Until, one morning, the generals announced that all the fun had gone out of the game, and that the remaining armies should direct their energies towards a new enemy: their sister world, Hextacosulous Green. The inhabitants of Green were just as bad. Most of them didn’t have a conciliatory bone in their bodies. The war went on for ten- thousand years. And you know what? They enjoyed it. We in the Rock Belt - a scattering of asteroids that fills Hextacosulite space - just kept our heads down. That’s our way. My father was 11-feet tall and lived most of his life in the emergency tunnels. Lived there for ten-thousand years as Blue fought Green and Green fought Blue. Until one day, he woke up to silence. The battle appeared to be over. So a party of investigators rose up from the Rock Belt and made landfall on Blue and Green. Both worlds had become great blank white wastelands. Except, in an obscure corner of Hextacosulous Blue, my father discovered a small pool of thick dark liquid. It was moving, thrashing, writhing about. He put it under the microscope. And do you know what he saw? The war between the Green and the Blue. Who knows what weapon had wrought this transformation upon the parties, but there they were, in the field of the microscope, reduced to a slick of warring microbes. Tumbling, grasping. struggling. And so the war went on, in a test tube in my father’s study, for another ten-thousand years. It became a curiosity that he used to bring out at parties. He’d place it in the glare of the stereopticon, and we’d watch the battle projected on the ceiling. Until the day I decided to run away from home, and take it with me - hoping that I might earn a small living by using it to entertain paying customers. Until the day I came to London, and you, Mary Prout, invited me into the snug bar of the Lamb and Flag on Long Acre.’

‘Madam,’ said the Doctor, steepling his fingers like a presiding

Justice, ‘do you realise that for the last three months, an interplanetary war has been raging in your handbag?’

Mary Prout was not listening. She was staring at a group of new dinner guests who had slipped, unannounced, into the room - flowing under the door like a puddle of sentient molasses, oozing over the wainscot and up the wallpapered boards of the booth; coalescing into a sea of tiny faces and figures. A gaggle of pantomime clowns; a flock of beady-eyed robins; a row of smiling choristers. Other figures too, new to the party: a group of playing-card royals; sixteen Christmas puddings, their currants massing into malignant sneers; a conurbation of snow-stacked country churches; a forest of pear trees, each topped with a vicious-looking partridge.

‘The robins on my Christmas cards,’ gasped Simia.

‘Anak,’ said the Doctor, drily. ‘Are we in any danger?’

‘Only Mary Prout,’ intoned the giant. ‘She has kept this war close to her body for three months. She has nursed it in her pocket. Taken comfort from it. Now she must become its final battlefield.’ He pushed the bottle across the table, until it was almost touching Mary’s hands. ‘Drink.’

‘Don’t do it,’ whispered Sarah Jane Smith.

Anak ignored her. ‘Drink,’ he repeated.

Mary looked to the Doctor, but found no comfort in his eyes.

‘It’s the only way to bring these events to a conclusion,’ he affirmed. ‘This, Mary, is your Sydney Carton moment.’

Mary rose to her feet. With shaking hands, she popped the stopper from the bottle. ‘To the Prince,’ said Mary. ‘God rest his soul.’

Six hours later, teasing the bones from an enormous pair of kippers at the bar of a well-upholstered establishment on Mercer Street, Sarah Jane Smith found it hard to recollect exactly how her supper at the Cremorne Gardens had concluded. She remembered how

Mary had downed the contents of the bottle in a gulp; how the mass of inky figures had swarmed all over her body like ants on a discarded toffee- apple; how, instead of screaming, Mary had let out a series of impressively dirty laughs and given Anak a hearty thump on the back. She also remembered the Doctor getting to his feet and asking the maitre d' to fetch a case of champagne.

But there was one image that refused to make sense in the cold light of a December Sunday morning in 1861: the Doctor, Anak and Simia belting out *Rule, Britannia* at the tops of their voices as Mary Prout stood on the table and peeled down her corset. And on the woman's back, Sarah felt sure, was the most astonishingly vivid and intricate tattoo that she had ever seen: the Crystal Palace, sparkling in the summer sunshine; the arms of the house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, with the lions of Thuringen and Meissen rampant; Queen Victoria and her Prince Consort, in medieval dress, gazing into each other's eyes. The work was so fine that Albert's whiskers appeared to be moving in the breeze. Sarah resolved never again to drink champagne bottled before 1850.

The proprietor slammed a mug of hot coffee on the counter. 'Will the gentleman be coming back, miss? Only his eggs are starting to burn at the edges.'

No answer was required. The Doctor crashed in through the door of the chophouse, still a little unsteady on his feet. He dragged another stool to the counter, flopped down by Sarah lane Smith and pulled a newspaper from the inside pocket of his velvet jacket. He pushed the paper towards his companion. 'Be discreet with that,' he said. 'Fresh from the TARDIS library. Isn't out for another ten days.'

The front page was bordered with funereal black ink. Sarah gazed at the date: 24 December 1861. The Doctor tapped at an advertisement in the entertainments column.

EGYPTIAN HALL, Piccadilly. Special presentation for Christmas week only. Maria Parota, the Living Panorama. A Marvel of the Tattooist's Art. A singular tribute to the Lamented Prince Consort. Gentlemen receive a cigar, gratis.

The Doctor refolded the newspaper, ‘Shall we stick around for a few days and catch her act?’ he breezed. ‘I hear she’s quite good.’

Short Trips: Farewells

I wrote an editor's note explaining the theme for this one, but for some reason unknown to me it didn't make it to print, so I'll explain now. I'd agreed to return to the range to edit the final collection - well, how could I resist? So this was us all waving goodbye to Short Trips. But then, well, it wasn't the final collection after all. But it was still my last collection - so the theme still felt appropriate to me, although the reader at large probably wouldn't have spotted that or cared. Actually, they probably wouldn't even be interested in that explanation, which is probably why it didn't appear. Anyway, bye bye, Short *Trips.* It was nice knowing you.

After the last weepie story (OK, so you'll probably have just read eleven stories in between, but from my perspective...) something funny seemed to be in order - and *Life* After Queth by Matt Kimpton fitted the bill perfectly (although like a lot of the best humorous prose, it's got a heart, too). One of the joys of short stories in Doctor Who is that they can fill in the gaps. Who could possibly resist the idea of the Gravis having a bit of an adventure with the Doctor and Tegan after Frontios?

Jacqueline Rayner

Life After Queth
Matt Kimpton

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Tegan Jovanka

Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through existence towards its inevitable termination.

Of course, in another, rather more accurate sense, it did no such thing. The idea is frankly asinine. There can be, by definition, no change in n-dimensional phase-space, where time is just another unchanging axis, the infinity of events a static block of fact, the marvellous tracery of the universe fixed and complete. There is no movement. No was, will or could be. Only is.

This is why phase-space is so dull.

Nevertheless, the world moved. As the plane of the present slewed on through the slab of history -for all that neither of them existed or did any such thing - the planet edged ever closer to its destiny. And then, some would say, a box appeared. This too is patently drivel. Things can't appear in phase-space. They're either there or not.

Nevertheless - the box appeared. This is why real life is so exciting.

'Extraordinary! What's this green stuff?' asked the woodlouse.

'Moss,' said Tegan wearily. She'd said a lot of things wearily recently, from 'Just a wall' to 'Roundels, apparently' to 'I don't know, leave it alone', all of which were apparently desperately exciting to their current, hopefully soon-to- be-ex, passenger.

Oh, yes. *Passenger.* Their hideous, alien, gravity-controlling insect passenger, which had tried to kill all of them on Frontios, and which the Doctor had viciously dealt with by inviting it into the TARDIS and giving it a lift somewhere else.

The thing gaped at her, antennae quivering in excitement. ‘Moss! What is moss?’

‘Well, not this, if we’re going to be technical,’ came a distracted-sounding voice from somewhere in the vicinity of Tegan’s knees. ‘I’d have said more of a liverwort, really. See the rhizoids? Very simple structure. No sign of protonemata, either, although that could be the time of year... ‘

Tegan glanced down. The Doctor was kneeling against the stained, rocky wall of the cave opening, where the alien liverwort was no doubt making a terrible mess of his period knees. He was frowning at the wall through half-moon glasses, fingering a few leafy fronds of what Tegan had so casually and erroneously dismissed as moss. He held some up to the light, presumably for the woodlouse to get a better view of the laughably simple rhizoids. ‘What do you think?’

The giant woodlouse — it was actually a Tractator, Tegan recalled, and called itself the Gravis, although she wasn’t sure why she was supposed to care — shuffled forward, body swaying with the weight of its bulky shell. Its slanted, almond-shaped eyes, with wavy lines in place of pupils, gave it a thoughtful, cunning air. ‘I don’t know, Doctor... What’s a year?’

Tegan sighed. Her own limited stock of patience had been exhausted about twenty minutes into the trip, when the woodlouse’s boundless enthusiasm for learning about the TARDIS had run up against the limits of her knowledge of it

— which pretty much amounted to how the bit in the middle went up and down, and what you pulled to open the door. Since then she’d been cooped up inside in an increasingly foul mood — ‘Just a short hop!’ the Doctor had promised, and then, when pressed after 12 hours, gone off on one about temporal perspective and tangential chronomass — with nothing to do but try to explain the function of a wicker chair to something evolutionarily incapable of sitting down. No wonder their other travelling companion had wanted to sit this one out.

‘Doctor...’ she hinted. ‘Turlough will be waiting...’

‘Just a moment, Tegan. There’s something not quite right here.’

No kidding, she thought. This was supposed to be a waste-disposal mission — drop off the leader of the despicable Tractators on some uninhabited planet where it couldn’t kill anybody, then head back to Frontios for tea and victory — and now the Doctor had gone and made friends with it. Only hours ago they’d had to forcibly prevent it from using zombified human colonists to excavate its planet and turn it into a spaceship, but trust the Doctor not to let that get in the way. Kolkokron was a nice change from the barren crags of Frontios, at least. The TARDIS had barely even managed its usual trick of landing in a desolate cave, choosing as a compromise this rather pleasant mossy hollow in the side of a forest-filled crater. The trees seemed almost supernaturally verdant, forming a thick canopy webbed together by curving, interwoven branches that hung down in loops and threads to plunge back into the rich, moist earth.

There was no birdsong, no whirr or chirrup of insects, but the air was an orange-grey mist of rain hissing gently all around them, softening the distance into hazy suggestion and smelling of just-cut grass. It was, Tegan decided, stupid and unfair.

After all, this was the first peaceful place they’d seen in months, and they’d gone and brought a monster with them. She’d much rather have brought the surviving colonists here and left the Gravis to its shiny caves and stupid gravel,

but the Doctor had been adamant. He couldn’t be seen to interfere, for reasons that presently eluded her but probably included the words ‘Rassilon’ and ‘Laws of Time’, and that meant moving the woodlouse. It was Kolkokron or nothing.

The Doctor stood up abruptly, brushing bits of phoney moss from his hand. ‘This isn’t Kolkokron,’ he said.

Beside him, the woodlouse looked astonished, inasmuch as that was possible for a six-foot crustacean with no moving features. Essentially it just flapped its paws. ‘It’s not?’ it screeched, in a voice of pure, grating evil. ‘Golly.’

Tegan snorted. ‘TARDIS technology comes up trumps again.’

‘Nothing so straightforward. The TARDIS says this is Kolkokron. It’s certainly in the right place. I cross-referenced the coordinates from the Yyb Fissure — that’s barely a meteor’s throw away. And yet...’ He waved a hand expansively at the dense forest that lay before them. ‘That’s not Kolkokron.’

‘It is certainly a mystery, Doctor!’

Tegan scowled. ‘It’s only a planet. Maybe you just don’t recognise this bit.’

‘Impossible. I know Kolkokron like the back of Mimas, it’s completely without life.’

‘Ah! And lacks this fascinating liverwort!’ Flap, flap. Idiot.

‘Exactly,’ said the Doctor. He stuck his hands in his pockets, surveying the forest before them with a pensive air. ‘I had wondered whether all this had been brought here recently, some sort of planet-forming, but it looks native enough. Plant-only biospheres leave a very distinctive evolutionary footprint.’

The Gravis wiggled its antennae in glee. ‘Then the logic is unassailable. We have discovered an anomaly in space and time!’

Tegan glared at the back of its head, which looked exactly like the rest of its lumpy hunch of a shell. ‘Or,’ she offered, ‘we’re lost.’

‘Indeed,’ it crowed. ‘Lost in a spatial-temporal distortion it will take all our wits to unravel!’

Tegan rolled her eyes.

‘Now, come on,’ scolded the Doctor. ‘There’s a mystery here, Tegan. Don’t you think we should make some effort to solve it?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I think we should get back to Frontios.’

‘But what about the anomaly?’

‘Nuts to the anomaly. Turlough will be wondering where we are.’

‘So am I. That’s the point.’

Tegan sighed. The woodlouse had bobbed its way over to the cave mouth, and was now delicately clambering out into the open air. It was making excited little noises about how big trees were, and how colourful everything looked, and how it had always imagined sky would be flatter than that. It was just possible she hated it now even more than when it had been trying to kill her and use her corpse to drive a digger.

‘It’ll do though, won’t it?’ she pleaded. ‘I mean, the wretched thing looks happy enough.’ She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘Let’s just take off while it’s not looking.’

There was a pause. The Doctor gave a little cough. While the Gravis trundled on its merry way down the slope outside, doing its gravelly best to whistle, a nasty feeling formed in Tegan’s stomach. The promise of a row.

‘Doctor... You did *tell* it we were leaving it here?’

He shifted uncomfortably, faffing about with his glasses and feigning sudden interest in a wobbly hinge as an excuse not to look at her. ‘Try to understand, Tegan... The poor creature’s been under a lot of stress. Finding out the humans it killed are sentient... The loss of its extrasensory drone bodies... Falling over... ‘

‘Doctor!’ Tegan said, incredulity rising in her throat like very angry vomit. She knew it wasn’t exactly the Doctor’s style to drop the Gravis off a cliff or something while it was unconscious, but this was ridiculous. ‘You can’t get squeamish about abandoning it, the thing’s a murderer! You should have killed it when you had the chance!’

‘He has apologised, Tegan,’ replied the Doctor reproachfully.

‘Anyway, what would that achieve?’

‘It would have served it right!’

The Doctor frowned. ‘What a peculiar idea. Still, it’s too late now.’

‘Not for us. The place is uninhabited, we can just zap off back to Frontios.’ ‘What, and risk exposing him to an unknown psycho-quantum field? No. Not until we find out what’s going on. Then we’ll... Then we’ll abandon him. I promise.’

Yeah, thought Tegan. And I’ll drop you back at Heathrow first thing. The Doctor’s promises had a way of taking a while to come true.

‘Come, companion Tegan, let us explore!’ shrieked the Gravis from outside, where it was busy discovering the joy of rain. ‘There is a mystery to solve here!’ Tegan sighed. It was going to be one of those days. Again.

It is important to remember that events only happen once. If that.

Even the most casual inspection of the so-called ‘nature’ of the alleged universe will demonstrate that time, itself a parochial absurdity of purely academic interest, is a linear concept. Even if it were to be admitted that Queth was moving through phase-space towards its doom, then (which it is not, such a notion being arrant conceptual tosh), it certainly couldn’t be said that it were doing so for a second or greater time. Not only can a complex space-time event not have an ending, it absolutely cannot have ended countless times already.

Such claims are twaddle. Drivel. The baldest of dash. The poppiest, one might say, of cock.

Queth was hurtling - or rather not, as change is an almost violently meaningless concept - towards its certain if purely notional doom, for the first time, the last time, the absolute and only time.

Again.

The Gravis wasn't good with hills, it turned out. Particularly ones made entirely from thick, dark mud, alleviated only by the occasional hidden tree root or treacherous extrusion of unexpected rock. It had fallen over twice, the first time with great enthusiasm and the second rather less so, and Tegan was growing heartily sick of levering it out of the slime. So far they'd explored a couple of hundred yards of muddy forest, and solved precisely nothing.

In fairness she wasn't doing much better herself — she liked to think of her leather miniskirt as a practical choice for the discerning girl-about-the-cosmos, but her heels weren't doing her any favours, and her timeless, streaky punk top was slick with rain. The Doctor, of course, was his usual mix of frowning curiosity and bursts of sudden, boundless enthusiasm, merrily leading them in the direction of where he claimed to be able to see a pall of dirty grey smoke rising over the trees. CA sure sign of a level-4B technology!' he'd promised, although Tegan was fairly sure that was a pencil.) He strode across the muck with something amounting to glee, extolling the virtues of what, to Tegan, was perfectly ordinary dirt, as the lumbering woodlouse levered its way out of another blasted pothole.

'Tremendous nitrogen levels, you see,' he was saying. Or something like that, at any rate: she'd just caught a heel on something unwise. 'Rich sunlight, plenty of water, all the mud you can eat... Must be marvellous for growing dahlias.'

'I know little of these... "dahlias", Doctor,' said the Gravis, struggling out of a small pit. It flexed its antennae forlornly, a haze of bright pink light forming around the veiny, tentacular branches above as it tried to lift itself with its stupid gravity powers. The only result was a splatter of dirty rainwater as the canopy temporarily gave way, showering the creature with twigs and rotting leaves. 'Are all planets so... mouldy?' it asked, when it had fought its way upright again. Tegan wouldn't exactly have called it whining, but there was definitely a less joyous tone to its voice.

Typically, the Doctor didn't seem to have noticed. 'Not at all, Gravis! Infinite space, infinite variety. There are worlds of metal, deserts of glass... Oceans of gas so thick you could walk across

them... Cities made of meat, and people made of kelp.'

'Eww,' said the woodlouse. It was something of a revelation.

'They're not all like that,' Tegan pointed out, stumping onwards. 'I mean, a lot of them are just rocks. Gallifrey's rubbish. And Frontios is a dump.'

'I am fond of Frontios.'

'Well, it's a paradise compared to most of the planets this close to the galactic rim,' the Doctor pointed out. 'Barren wastelands, most of them. All rocks and boulders.'

'Kolkokron's nice, though,' Tegan interjected hastily, giving him a meaningful glare. 'Isn't it?'

'Oh. Oh, yes. Splendid. I admit, it is a bit rocky... '

'I am fond of rocks,' said the Gravis, walking into a tree. Tegan shook her head and walked on, pretending not to notice. The Doctor's taste in companions had gone really weird since he'd changed his face and got into cricket, she thought. First Turlough, then that useless android who sulked in its corridor and refused to talk in anything but binary, and now Casper the Friendly Tractator. The sooner they got back to Frontios, the —

'Ululululululu!'

An unearthly shriek rang through the trees, piercing the stillness and her eardrums all at once. Bad news, she knew without thinking. This was no background forest noise, but a full-fledged, purposeful howl. As if in accompaniment, the branches started to rattle against one another in staccato beats, the weblike canopy shaking with echoes of distant movements.

'Doctor? I thought you said this planet was uninhabited!'

'Well, yes...' he said, looking around fretfully. 'I also said it was Kolkokron, and look how that turned out.'

The cry came again, echoing oddly through the web of foliage, sounding like the call of some otherworldly beast. Well, no, it sounded like a chicken gargling, but she wasn't about to take any risks.

'Hide!' she yelled, realising too late that in 'avoiding otherworldly hunter' terms she would have been better off whispering, or perhaps tapping people on the shoulder. Still, she grabbed the Doctor by the arm and hurled them both down into the damp undergrowth, which turned out to be composed of waxy, rhubarb-sized leaves that smelled faintly alcoholic. And almost immediately, he picked himself up and ran back the way they had come. What was he thinking?

'Doctor? Tegan?' called a voice dripping with what sounded like evil but which the Doctor had assured her was only mucus. Of course, the dratted Gravis. It was still standing by its tree, yards behind, oscillating twitchily back and forth in confusion. 'What is that sound? Where have you gone?'

She despaired sometimes, she really did. She picked herself up with a sigh, ready to follow the Doctor back to fetch it, but as she did so the cry came again, closer this time. This one sounded more like a chicken being strangled. But the next one sounded like a chicken saying, 'Shut up, idiot! Do you want to tell the whole world we're here?'

'Yes,' gargled another voice, nonplussed. 'Isn't that the point?' 'Oh, stop being contrary, Loff,' snapped a third.

'Don't have a go. You're always having a go.'

'Ululululu!'

'Oh, shut up, Trehv,' said several voices at once.

Tegan realised with a start that she was standing in full view of whatever was coming, and pelted back to the others, who had still barely budged an inch. There was a *zzchming* of what sounded

suspiciously like a laser, or a phaser, or one of those other things that ended in ‘aser’ and pain. She thought she saw a flash of blue somewhere away in the trees.

‘Run!’ she shouted to the Gravis. It looked at her blankly. It didn’t, Tegan realised, actually have any legs. Didn’t bode well.

‘Not that way, the *other* way!’ something shouted.

‘Ulululu!’

‘Oh, don’t set him off again.’

‘Are those… *aliens?’* the Gravis asked the Doctor, thrilled at the prospect.

Despite the Doctor’s best efforts to spur the woodlouse on, they were ambling away with all the urgency of a picnic.

‘Could we go a bit faster?’ she urged, over the Doctor’s babblings about xenomorphic biocompatibility. ‘I think they’ve got guns.’

‘Ooh, what’s a gun?’ asked the Gravis. Tegan fought the urge to kick it. Behind them, gargled cries of ‘Death to the Outsiders!’ echoed ever closer through the trees. That was familiar territory, at least, although the heckles that accompanied them (’Outside what, exactly? I mean it’s a forest, how much more outside can you get?’) were a new and exciting variation. She glanced back towards the unseen voices — which seemed to be going in circles and squabbling — and applied her shoulder to the Tractator’s shell, trying to get it to move onwards.

‘It won’t do you any good, you know,’ said a voice from right behind her. Tegan spun round. There was no one there.

‘Not that it’ll make any difference me telling you that. Blinkin’ predestination, it’s a mug’s game, really, isn’t it?’

Tegan stared. There *was* someone there, for certain values of ‘someone’, and indeed ‘there’. Hanging from the forest canopy by a

long, sinuous tail — no, by two tails — was an ugly, rumpled, warty creature with dull, dirty scales. It looked a bit like an armadillo would look if an armadillo had a face full of clacking mandibles, a pair of prehensile tails and a home on a planet of mud.

'Doctor... ' she said.

'Oh, have you found a friend, Tegan?' he asked distractedly, busy levering the Gravis off a small stone. 'Well done, we could do with more of those. Although personally I find the philosophical rejection of free will rather unconvincing.'

'Well, you can't help it, can you?' said the creature. 'Que se blinkin' ra, innit? You want to duck about now, Tegan.'

Tegan didn't know how the thing knew she was called Tegan, or indeed how it knew she was supposed to duck, or indeed generally what the hell was going on. However, two years aboard the TARDIS, off and on, had honed her instincts to a razor-sharp edge of terror. When someone said 'run', you ran. And when an alien armadillo said 'cluck'...

She hurled herself to the ground. A bolt of blue-white energy shot through the air where she had been standing a moment before, hissing as it turned the rain in its path to superheated steam. It slammed into a tree trunk yards away, and... something went wrong with her eyes. It was as if the world bulged out from the impact point, the forest seen for a moment through a grotesque magnifying lens before slamming back to nothing. The trunk had gone, but there was no hole, no smoke, no fire... The canopy just drooped a little lower there, the adjacent trees bent absurdly inwards, as if the space had simply been removed from existence and the world stitched back together around it, seamless but smaller.

'Twit,' came a voice from the trees.

'Well, you try aiming something with your *hands,'* something else retorted. 'I'd like to see you manage it.'

'Look out, Doctor!' shouted the Gravis excitedly, as another shot

hissed past them, wiping out an innocent clump of rhubarb. More by accident than anything else, the mobile chaos in the trees finally broke into the clearing, resolving itself into half-a-dozen more space-armadillos, all firing in random directions. With a *zzchming* of energy, a patch of mud by the Tractator's shell popped out of existence, prompting a woodlousy squeak of excitement.

'There he is! Next to the tree!' 'What tree? We're in a *forest.'* 'Watch out, don't shoot Nuss!' *Zzchming!*

'Oh, for Phoon's sake... what did I just say?'

The scaly little creatures swung rapidly through the trees, tail over tail like inverted monkeys, alternately ululating and telling each other to pack it in. Their bodies hung pendulum fashion from the ropelike branches, tiny mandibles clacking at the head of the lazy L of each body, just above the tiny, toylike guns they held in their front legs. There were only about six of them altogether, but then, thought Tegan, they only had to not miss once.

'Don't worry, they all miss you,' said the first, apparently psychic armadillo from a few feet above. She rolled over in time to see it drop lazily down from the canopy and plonk itself unceremoniously beside her, chewing on a bit of fruit, as another shot zzchminged through the trees and evaporated the spot where he had been hanging. 'Name's Chaugh, by the way. Resistance is futile.'

'Is it? To what?'

'Well... anything, really. That's predestination for you.' Tegan stared at it.

'Just making conversation.'

Zzchming! Zzchming! Zzchming! went the armadillos, bubbles of forest imploding on every side. The Gravis seemed positively delighted by the whole thing, looking around eagerly and emitting an 'ooh!' of excitement at every close shave. Tegan gave it a wretched glare, and decided, on balance, that she'd rather take her chances with being shot than lie here listening to it, accompanied

by the armadillo equivalent of Nostradamus.

Pulling herself to her feet by the shell of the captivated woodlouse, she was just in time to see the newcomers swinging to an erratic, seesawing halt in a rough semicircle around the Doctor. ‘We have you surrounded, Time Lord!’ crowed the closest one as she brushed herself down. The constant drizzle made it a completely pointless exercise, but she felt she had to make the effort.

‘No, you haven’t,’ she pointed out irritably. She was tired and muddy already, and being shot at hadn’t improved her temper. ‘Half of you aren’t even facing the right way. And there’s a massive gap over there.’

‘Kratt, I *told* you to cover his flank,’ muttered the first speaker crossly.

‘That’s not his flank, it’s his side,’ said, presumably, Kratt — a scrawny little creature with a lopsided head, hanging near the back of the group and sulking.

‘Don’t be such a pedant!’

‘Oh, leave him alone, Plong,’ chimed another.

‘You keep out of this!’

‘Ulululu!’

‘Shut up!’

This was directed, she assumed, at Trehv, who turned out to be the smallest armadillo. He was hanging upside down, aiming enthusiastically at a mossy rock, and didn’t give the impression of being quite all there. Plong gave him a long, hard glare, as if daring him to go ululu again, before attempting to regain his momentum.

‘Doctor!’ he said grandly, in the manner of someone embarking on a long- rehearsed speech.

‘Why does everyone know my name today?’ grumbled the Doctor. ‘It’s terribly off-putting, I —’ He was silenced by Plong, who was looking daggers at him, inasmuch as this is possible for an armadillo. ‘Sorry, do go on.’

‘Doctor!’ Plong began again, with a stern cough. ‘Tegan! And Gravis! We, the Queeth of Queth, greet you, and by the will of the people and the knowledge of Phoon, apologise for what we are about to do.’

The Doctor and Tegan exchanged worried glances. ‘This is nice,’ said the Gravis, peering up short-sightedly at Plong with every sign of fascination. ‘Does this sort of thing happen a lot?’

‘Like you wouldn’t believe,’ muttered Tegan.

Plong waited for them to finish before resuming, with a cross little hmph. ‘The Time of Isolation is nearly upon us,’ he said, after a moment’s pause to remember where he’d got up to. ‘The Doctor must not be allowed to interfere.

According to Phoon’s great plan, and to safeguard our planet, our future and our cats, we sentence you —’

‘Did he say cats?’ asked Tegan. This was turning out to be quite an odd day.

‘We sentence you — ‘

‘What’s a cat?’ asked the Gravis.

‘We *sentence* you,’ snarled Plong, ‘thank you, yes — to removal from the physical universe.’ On his gesture, the armadillos swung closer, tightening the circle and occasionally bumping into one another and swearing. Plong did his best to ignore them. ‘No appeal is permitted. Execution is immediate. Prepare to be Isolated.’

‘Don’t worry,’ muttered Chaugh, as the circle of armadillos levelled their guns at her head. ‘They don’t do it.’

The Gravis gaped, although in fairness it would be hard pressed to do anything else. ‘Execution?’ it rasped, the bizarre dangly bits in its mouth rippling outwards in alarm. ‘You mean... these creatures intend to kill us?’ It sounded terrified, which was a bit rich coming from something that had been intending full-scale planetary invasion the day before. It gave a wheezy scream as Plong raised an arm, and inexplicably threw itself to the ground — or at any rate fell over fairly purposefully — landing face down in the mud with a sad little splatter. It lay there on its belly, scrabbling at the mud with its pathetic flipper paws. Tegan felt faintly embarrassed.

‘Now wait a moment!’ cried the Doctor, waving his hands in the air for a chance to speak — and stepping defensively, Tegan couldn’t help noticing, in front of the Gravis, leaving her directly in the line of fire. ‘That’s Phoon’s great plan, is it? Safeguard the planet, don’t permit me to interfere, that sort of thing?’

A general ripple of agreement ran through the tangled branches. ‘Yes!’ it went, and ‘Phoon’s great plan!’ and *‘Ulululu!’*

‘Never going to happen,’ muttered Chaugh from somewhere near Tegan’s knees.

‘Ah, ah! And how do you know that?’ the Doctor demanded, demonstrating the ancient art of making it up as he went along. ‘Is he here?’

Phoon, said the general consensus, was not here. Phoon, added a vocal minority, was dead. But Phoon, insisted a large contingent led by Plong, would have wanted them shot.

‘Please do not shoot me with a gun!’ added the sobbing Gravis from its puddle. Tegan rolled her eyes.

The Doctor frowned up at them through the drizzle, feigning confusion. ‘He’s not here? Then how can you be sure what he’d have wanted, hmm?’

Tegan couldn’t quite believe they were even trying this. ‘He left orders,’ said Plong, fixing the Doctor with a steely glare that might

have been more effective if he wasn't eight feet away and an armadillo. The Doctor beamed back at him unfazed.

'Ah, but how do you know he did? Maybe that's just what he wanted you to think.'

'It is what we think.'

'Well, there you are then. Dare you take that risk?'

He held the gaze, gambling on an empty hand, and several empty heads. The Queeth of Queth looked at one another, bemused. Chaugh continued to pick dolefully through the leaf-litter, while Trehv revolved slowly on the spot, one tail caught in his mandibles. The sword of Damocles hanging by the thread of ignorance.

Very slowly, the Doctor lowered his hands. A tiny, self-satisfied snort drifted up from Chaugh. 'Told you,' he sniffed.

'Splendid. So perhaps now you'd like to put those things down and explain this plan to us like civilised creatures? And help us get our friend up out of the mud, it plays havoc with his uropods.'

'And then can we shoot you?' asked Kratt hopefully. 'We'll see.'

Free will, it has often been noted, is neither.

Past and future, schism and spinward, throughstream and counterphase; the terms are arbitrary. Every point in phase-space, throughout every dimension, already exists. If actions do determine what comes after (which they don't, of course, because there is no after), it is only because they too are determined by what came before (although, of course, there is no before).

Nobody said you were going to like this.

There is no room for freedom. Those clusters of phase-space nodes that call themselves people have no more 'choice' in their 'actions' than characters in a story already written. Even if time existed, which it doesn't, even if time repeated, which it can't, still, people would not be

free.

Try as they might - and they would, for that too is inevitable - no one could save the world.

‘So Phoon *has* saved the world?’ the Doctor asked, for easily the severalth time. It was proving a frustrating task to get a straight answer from the armadillos, and the reason why was cleaning its mandibles with a twig.

Nope, not remotely,’ it said, spitting out a pip. It was Chaugh.

‘Yes he has!’ said Plong, who was hanging above him, swinging angrily by the tails.

‘He hasn’t, you know,’ said Chaugh. ‘We’re all doomed.’

‘Yes he has,’ chorused the others. There was no denying it, this was gripping stuff.

The day, if that’s what it was, was turning cold, the faint white suggestion of a sun sinking lower in the mist. Tegan’s excitingly streaky punk top now clung wetly to her back in the drizzle, snapping chill slaps down her back every time she lost her grip on the Tractator’s slick shell. Overhead, armadillos swung in excited circles in the rain, offering useful advice like ‘Pick it up’, ‘Don’t drop it again’, and ‘Oh, you did’. The Doctor crouched in the mud, trying to get some sense out of the others about Phoon and his plan, whoever-and-his-whatever they were. Tegan couldn’t tell if he was genuinely interested, playing for time until the creatures forgot about killing them, or just trying to get out of helping pick up the bug.

Still, thought Tegan as she set about once more levering the wretched Gravis out of the mud, it was marginally better than being shot.

‘The world has been saved,’ Kratt was explaining calmly to a baffled Doctor. He was apparently one of the brighter Queeth, and as such one of the few not doing headstands in the rhubarb. ‘Phoon’s plan

guarantees it.'

'Does it heck,' muttered Chaugh moodily. The end is seriously nigh. Twenty- three and a half, 24 minutes tops.'

'Splitter.'

'Now, hold on...' said the Doctor wearily, squatting between them with his hands clasped between his stripy knees. 'Saved from whom, exactly? What precisely is Queth supposed to be in danger from?'

'Nothing. It's perfectly safe.'

'No, but if it wasn't... '

'It is.'

'Mysterious enemies,' Chaugh chimed in morosely. 'Dunno who they are.

Been hunting us for as long as anyone can remember.'

'They've destroyed all our home planets,' added Loff from a tree. 'It's been awful.'

'But no longer!' Plong assured them. 'Phoon has made sure of that.'

'No he hasn't,' added Chaugh. Someone threw a nut at him.

'Phoon has a plan,' said Kratt matter-of-factly, shushing the others into quiet with a spare tail. 'The Echo Effect will surround us. The Time of Isolation will begin. Queth will be protected from all dangers, and for all eternity.'

'Yeah, that's true enough,' admitted Chaugh. He held a piece of leaf up to the light, gave it due consideration, and popped it in his mouth. He chewed it thoughtfully before adding, 'Still gonna end, though.'

‘No it *isn’t.’*

The argument pinged interminably back and forth, tugging Tegan’s attention this way and that like some crazy alien tennis match. She resolved not to let herself get sucked in. She’d had enough of interminable arguing in the TARDIS; enough of the end of the world on every world they’d landed; enough of crazy alien tennis that time on Kasteru, and enough of the armadillos about two minutes after she’d met them. She’d frankly had enough of the Gravis too, but her misery could do with the company, and at least dragging it out of the mire made her feel useful.

At last, with a final grunt of effort, she managed to roll the thing over. Blobs of carapace squelched slowly back into the mud to leave it lying forlornly on its side, brownish water puddling around its middle. ‘This planet is... not friendly,’ it informed her weakly, once she’d picked the mud out of its wibbly mouth bits.

‘You’re not kidding,’ she muttered, the sound of gargly argument all around them. ‘Occupational hazard with time travel. No one’s ever pleased to see you.’

The creature struggled gamely to right itself, a haze of pink wrapping around nearby tree trunks for purchase. ‘I do not mean the animal tree creatures,’ it wheezed, as it wiggled its antennae for all it was worth. ‘This ground is... cruel. I tried to burrow into the safety of the earth, but the earth is not safe. It is dirty and wet, and it has bits in it.’

‘Well, that’s mud for you,’ said Tegan.

She tried to sound spiteful, but she couldn’t really work up the enthusiasm. After all, in her experience disillusionment was what life was all about. For Tegan it had been becoming an air hostess. She’d wanted to fly, not stand on the sidelines looking pretty and answering idiot questions. The 19805 hadn’t been ready for that, so she’d turned to the future; travelling in an alien time machine capable of visiting any planet in the cosmos, any moment in the whole of recorded history... just so she could stand on the sidelines looking pretty stupid instead, and *asking* the idiot questions.

The dispirited woodlouse was simply discovering a universal rule. It didn't matter if you took the money, opened the box, or climbed inside it and took a spin round the galaxy: all choices led to disappointment. Made you spit blood just to think about it, Tegan thought bitterly. But then what could you do?

'There you are, Gravis!' cried the Doctor suddenly, springing to his feet and scattering armadillos in all directions. He bounded over to clasp the Tractator by the closest things it had to shoulders, beaming at its disgusting mouth and failing in any way to congratulate the mud-stained Tegan for doing all the work. 'Just the chap we were looking for. We have a new mystery to solve!'

The woodlouse looked quietly aghast. 'Oh,' it said. 'Good.'

'You see, it seems this planet — which I hardly need remind you isn't supposed to be here in the first place — is in a situation of some peril. In fact it's going to be destroyed by mysterious enemies in about twenty minutes.'

'No, it isn't!' shouted Plong from the rhubarb.

'Yes, it is,' said Chaugh.

'Yes it *is,'* countered Loff, who had got a bit lost.

'... or else it isn't,' the Doctor concluded. 'There's a certain amount of disagreement on the issue.'

'Oh, no, there isn't!' chanted Loff.

The Gravis swivelled to look around itself, antennae jiggling in panic. Little blips and blops of pink appeared and disappeared in the air around it, whipping branches back and forth at random, and twanging Trehv into the rhubarb with an excited yip. 'The... *world* is going to end?' it gasped, raindrops zizzling down its shell as it quivered all over.

The Doctor looked rather startled, doing that calming little hand

gesture that Tegan found so infuriating. ‘Ah, well, now, we can’t be sure of that,’ he said hastily, over the sound of Loff insisting that they could. ‘That’s rather the point. Chaugh is convinced Queth can’t be saved, but the others are equally sure it already has been. Fascinating, don’t you think?’

‘No!’ shouted Loff enthusiastically. They did their best to ignore her.

The Gravis gave a pensive wobble. ‘Yes, it is most… fascinating,’ it wheezed, in a voice that wouldn’t fool a four-year-old. The Doctor beamed delightedly. ‘Either we cannot save this planet, or we do not need to do so. So, perhaps… we should return to the TARDIS?’

Tegan felt a reluctant surge of admiration. That was the sort of crass cowardice she could respect. It was almost like having Turlough with them.

But the Doctor was having none of it. ‘What, and lose out on all this?’ he cried, striding around in the rain and gesturing grandly at nothing in particular. ‘Give up on finding out what happened to Kolkokron? Never get to the bottom of Phoon’s plan? No, no, there’s always a chance, always a choice. Always something you can do if you dig deep enough. I thought you liked mysteries.’

The Gravis blanched beige, looking helplessly at Tegan. She shrugged. If the Doctor wasn’t interested in hearing her opinion, the damned thing would have to handle him itself. ‘But how can we hope to help?’ it squeaked. ‘The planet’s destiny is fixed.’

Fair point, thought Tegan. ‘Maybe they should just get another one? I mean, no offence, but this place is useless.’ There was a pause. It wore a variety of quizzical expressions, all aimed in Tegan’s direction.

‘How would we do that?’ asked Kratt eventually.

She was floored. ‘I don’t know… in spaceships and things.’

‘What’re they, then?’

Pathetic. She was an idiot dressed as a bigger idiot, on a planet full of idiots who thought she was the biggest idiot of all. She gave up and sat down on a tree stump that turned out, predictably, to be rotten to the point of mushiness. No wonder the Gravis had usurped her. It was a woodlouse with the IQ of a man, and she was a woman with the IQ of an air hostess. She should just stay quiet like a good girl, and let the grown-ups talk.

'Come to think of it, that's rather a good point, Gravis,' said the Doctor thoughtfully, flicking his frock coat aside to jam his hands in his trouser pockets, and showering Tegan with mud in the process. He'd completely ignored her comments, of course. 'If the world is either definitely saved or definitely doomed, why bother trying to kill us?'

'To prevent you from interfering with Phoon's plan!' shouted Plong immediately, button-eyes shining. He'd been waiting for an excuse to shout something for ages.

'Ah, so it can be interfered with? The future isn't fixed?'

Tegan bit her lip. She absolutely, resolutely was not going to ask what he meant. 'They didn't try to kill us,' wheezed the Gravis, out of nowhere.

Nobody said anything for a moment, except Tegan, who went, 'What do you mean, Gravis?' before she could stop herself. There were no words for how stupid she had become.

'I had not realised. They said Prepare to be Isolated. That is not the same as death, is it?'

The Doctor, pulled up short mid-deduction, spun on his heels to stare at the nearest armadillo. 'It's not?'

'No,' Loff explained, or rather failed to. 'You'd have been in a wallet dimension.'

'Satchel dimension,' Kratt corrected, winning himself several foul looks.

‘A... pocket dimension?’ suggested the Gravis. Tegan scowled. She’d been about to say that.

Was it?’

The Doctor’s brow furrowed. ‘That’s certainly what the implosion effect suggests. Snipped into a vacuum universe, severed from the rest of creation...

Cut off from cause and effect, so we couldn’t interfere with their destiny. But why go to all that bother? We’d still be dead.’

‘No, you wouldn’t. It’s condom fizzles,’ said Loff proudly. There was another one of those clumsy silences. Tegan determined to sit still and let the grown-ups deal with it.

‘What?’ asked the Doctor at last.

‘Quondam physiques,’ Kratt confirmed, more or less. ‘What you do is, you put a cat in a box... ‘

‘Quantum physics, yes, I know what it is, I don’t understand the relevance.’

‘It’s the Fundamental Theory of Phoon, ain’t it,’ volunteered Chaugh, who had been poking with interest at the Gravis’s bottom. Tegan preferred not to wonder why. ‘You can’t change the future, so what you do instead is, you hide from it. No one’s around to see you, that means no one knows if you’re alive or dead, and that means you’re both.’

The Doctor glared at him. ‘Claptrap,’ he retorted, after a moment of grimacing contemplation. ‘Utter tripe.’

‘It’s not! It’s all part of Phoon’s plan!’ cried the massed armadillos, except Chaugh, who didn’t seem to care either way, and Trehv, who was squealing somewhere in the undergrowth pretending to be a Gravis. ‘That’s how he’s going to save the world! It is the power of the Echosphere!’

The Doctor stared at them, aghast. It wasn't often he was rendered speechless, but this seemed to have done the trick. Tegan would have to remember it for use when she could do with a spot of peace and quiet. 'Of course. The "Time of Isolation". That's your plan? Erase yourselves from the real-space universe, so no one can tell whether you've been destroyed? No wonder you're confused about what's going to happen, it's quantum uncertainty on a grand scale.'

'No, it isn't.'

'It's also insane.'

'Is not!'

It was an all-too-familiar scene. Aliens hellbent on doing something genocidally ill-advised. The Doctor railing against the nearly inevitable. Tegan swept along in the middle of it, following nothing.

'I. do not understand,' the Gravis whispered to itself, as the argument zipped back and forth.

'Join the club,' muttered Tegan, surprised. She could hear the Doctor yelling about science in the background, which was one of his favourite things to do. He seemed to be chiefly concerned with explaining the difference between a cat and a planet, which Tegan hadn't previously considered to be very high up their list of priorities, but she assumed he knew what he was doing.

'Hang on though, I thought you were enjoying working all this out?' she objected. The woodlouse looked at her like she was mad. It was looking decidedly the worse for wear, she realised; bits of dead leaves stuck to its muddy underbelly, sodden fur clinging wetly to its carapace, and with a definite droop to its antennae. It had never left the safety of its tunnels before, come to think of it. Never been faced with the Doctor's enthusiasm. Never had to avert an apocalypse. 'Never mind,' she said.

The Doctor was still going off on one about cats. Something to do with this thing of locking them in boxes, apparently, which seemed

a thoroughly reprehensible way of carrying on, although he claimed it didn't matter if you didn't look. Tegan couldn't see that standing up in court.

'Come on, you,' she told the Gravis, clambering wearily to her feet. It looked at her blankly, although whether it meant to do or just happened to look like that anyway was open to debate. 'He's shouting long words. That means he's about to save the world.'

'Then... what are *we* about to do?'

She shrugged, pulling her sopping top straight around her and squaring her shoulders into the drizzle. Idiot question. 'We watch him.'

'Honestly, what *nitwit* taught you about the Schrodinger's Cat Principle?' the Doctor was crying, with such urgency his voice skidded into a higher register on random words. 'Building a vacuum universe isn't like putting up a Wendy house, you know.'

'Mitten universe,' said a voice from the trees. No one took any notice.

'You really think you can escape your doom by hiding in a separate dimension? Without a focal space-time matrix? Or a vortex anchor? Or the slightest conception of coherence physics? And you'll be okay because *no one will see you die?'*

There was a sharp silence, broken only by the sound of Loff falling out of a tree. 'Is that wrong?' asked someone in a small voice.

'Yup,' said Chaugh glumly. 'Seventeen minutes till the end of the world, by the way.'

The Doctor closed his eyes, and took a careful breath. 'Then I think you'd better take me to this Echosphere of yours, don't you?' he said. 'There isn't much time.'

Change is impossible without time. Time is impossible without change. It is trivially obvious, therefore, that time itself cannot change.

Even if history existed. Even if it repeated. Even if people had free will. The same choices would be made, the same events would repeat, the same history would play out, every time. No, don't look like that. It would.

There are no second chances. The loop of time does not go round and round until things end another way. The fate of Queth does not hang in the balance, waiting for the scales to fall.

There is a junction in phase-space called 'Queth ends'. So Queth would end. Get used to it.

The Echosphere was a disappointment, Tegan thought. But then these things always were. The fabled Gallifreyan Matrix had turned out to be a bit of a damp squib too, and the Big Bang had been rubbish. So it should have come as no great surprise that the 'Sphere was nothing but a big metal ball, about twice her height, so streaked with rust, water stains, bubbly patches of red-brown corrosion and the inevitable mud that she could barely make out its original colour. The whole thing looked on the verge of collapsing at any moment, which would be, she thought, the perfect end to the perfect day.

It was sitting at the very bottom of the crater, where the trees thinned out to bare rock — or to what would have been bare rock if it wasn't covered in more damned mud — surrounded by huge, ribbed metal cables, obscure bits of broken machinery and, now, a growing host of stroppy armadillos. The pall of smoke they'd seen from afar rose from it in uneven clouds as the drizzle sizzled away on contact, no doubt boiled away by some sort of ghastly radiation, which was probably eating away at her insides even as they spoke.

There was no sign of how it was supposed to save the planet, or destroy it, or indeed do anything at all except sit there and rust. It was all rather depressing. 'Thirteen minutes till the end of the world,' announced Chaugh, who was now perched on her left shoulder, despite her considerable efforts to the contrary. She smacked at him, but he dodged expertly away and bit her ear instead.

‘Now what, Doctor?’ she asked, before the woodlouse could get there and say it for her.

The Doctor prodded at what might once have been an important piece of technology, and his finger went through it in a small rain of rust. He pulled it out again and wiped it on his jumper, patting the panel apologetically. ‘I don’t quite know,’ he concluded, voicing a thought Tegan could have applied to a dozen things without trying. ‘The core systems seem functional enough, but the energy buffers have gone the way of all technology. How on earth were you expecting to power it?’

‘Not telling,’ snapped Plong from a wonky control bank. He’d been in a foul mood ever since the interminable argument over bringing the Doctor had ended, concluding in favour of doing so by three votes to one, with one abstention and one sort of ulubloohooey noise. ‘It’s a secret.’

‘It’s our greatest achievement,’ explained Loff proudly, from atop a crumbling metal box that might once have been a control panel and was now a sophisticated arrangement of holes. She tail-gestured at the ‘Sphere. ‘The Genius of Phoon.’

‘It would have to be. There’s no solar battery, no planet-sink, no gravity- lens... Not nearly enough stored energy for what it is.’

‘But what is it?’ Tegan asked, before she could stop herself.

‘It is a hybridised electromagnetogravitic device for detecting quantum echoes of far-flung events,’ came an exhausted, wheezy voice from the trees. Tegan looked up in surprise. She’d almost given up on the Gravis — it had valiantly started trudging down here, but at such a torturously slow pace she’d more or less assumed it would have given up. Yet there it stood at the edge of the clearing, carapace gleaming in the twilight. Its antennae were drooping down past its chin, the once shiny skin of its belly was caked with dried mud, and the thick, crusty white veins snaking over its chest and arms were pulsing with exertion. For a giant genocidal woodlouse, it looked surprisingly pathetic.

‘Well done, Gravis!’ said the Doctor, without missing a beat. ‘It detects the... the ripples, if you like, of quantum displacement through the universe.’ He caught Tegan’s blank look. ‘You know, how particles, when split, remain in contact at a quantum level? So that if one collapses the other will adopt the same phase?’ Her look became, if anything, blanker. ‘The basis of Hamilton-Jacobi teleportation?’

She shook her head. He looked a bit crestfallen. ‘Well... it’s like that,’ he finished lamely, tugging experimentally at what may or may not once have been a lever, and which in any case came off in his hand. He looked at it in surprise. ‘The whole thing’s obviously a remnant of a previous civilisation. But these creatures think it can save their world — cut it off permanently from the universe at a quantum level, so that no observer can collapse and actualise the waveform of their destruction.’

‘And can’t it?’ asked Tegan once he’d stopped talking; clinging to the bit about saving the world, like a life belt in the flood of gabble.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets, pontificating grimly. ‘Oh, no, it can do it all right. You’ve seen it happen — those echoic pulse regulators they’re using as guns. But if you cut something off from existence, it ceases to exist. That’s what it means. And I’m just guessing, but I don’t think total annihilation is what dear old Phoon was looking for.’

Tegan wasn’t honestly surprised. She’d seen a few of the other Queeth lurking in the shade of the trees, giggling, chasing their tails and having complicated arguments about mud. The odds of any one of them doing something scientific without messing it up wholesale were about on a par with her chances of going five minutes without asking a stupid question.

Talking of which, the Gravis had opened its mouth. She could almost hear the quantum echoes of the words ‘I’ll explain later’ rippling back from a few seconds in the future, and decided to save them both the effort. ‘I understand all that,’ she lied smoothly, eliciting a snort of disbelief from Chaugh. ‘But what else can we do?

I mean, if the alternative is having their enemies blow the place up... '

'But that's just the point!' cried the Doctor, slapping his palm down hard on a control panel, which sank mournfully into the mud behind him as he strode around with sudden, angry energy. 'The effect doesn't have to be localised, otherwise the 'Sphere could only detect itself! If I can persuade it to suppress the quantum reality of something other than Queth, I can drop a different target into a vacuum dimension.'

'The mysterious enemies!' cried the Gravis, much to Tegan's embarrassment. What did it say when a woodlouse made a better job of following things than you? 'You can use the Echosphere against them!'

'Yes, that's what I just said,' said the Doctor testily. 'However, it does rather depend on them letting me in on their little secret. "The Genius of Phoon", whatever that is. I'll have to shift the Schrodinger nexus, and that means having access to the core systems. I can't get that without power. I can't *save* them without power.' He turned to Plong, folding his arms. 'You understand? If you want your planet to be saved, if any of you want to live beyond the next 13 minutes —'

'Eleven minutes.'

'How time flies — then you must show me the Genius of Phoon. It's the only way.'

The Queeth looked at one another. And then, as one, all eyes turned to Plong, except Trehv's, which went round in little circles. On his throne of broken machinery, Plong drew himself up to his full height — although given that this was only a foot and a half the effect was slight to middling — and set his face in what, had he any recognisable features, might have been a determined expression. He managed to hold it for three whole seconds before deflating utterly.

'All right,' he said. 'It's round the other side. You better come and have a look.'

And before Tegan had even had time to take it in, the Doctor was breezing off round the 'Sphere with a handful of distressed armadillos in his muddy wake, leaving her standing there like a lemon. She started to trudge resignedly after him like a slightly more proactive lemon, but then found herself, inexplicably, hanging back for the Gravis to catch up. It was plodding along determinedly, head down, rain soaking disregarded into the thick black fur between the mucusy, overlapping pustules of its shell. And yet... Tegan was sure she could see fear in its eyes. Unless that was more mucus. She gave it a weak smile, feeling a bit stupid just walking along in silence. 'All right there, Gravis?' she asked feebly.

It swivelled to look at her, having to halt its progress to do so. 'Things are certainly... exciting, Tegan,' it rasped, trying none too successfully to keep the fear from its voice. 'We have been captured! By alien creatures! And... the world is going to end!'

'Welcome to the TARDIS,' Tegan muttered.

'It is all most exhilarating,' said the Gravis unconvincingly, moving on again, and looking ahead to where the Doctor was crouched beside the Echosphere, poking at something with a stick. 'And now... we must wait on the sidelines, yes? Hoping for the wise Doctor to find a solution?'

Tegan felt a bit put out. 'Not just that,' she said defensively. 'I'm usually right in the thick of things. Or, well... I get locked up, at least. Or possessed. Or locked up and possessed. Um. But sometimes I escape. And then get locked up again.' She tailed off, her mind a blank. 'You know,' she said. 'Heroics.'

The Gravis looked at her with large, sad eyes.

'You all die in ten minutes, by the way,' said Chaugh gloomily, his sharp claws scratching at her shoulder through her top. 'Sorry, it was all so exciting I forgot to say.

Everyone is going to die. This is what is known as a fact of life. Indeed, it is the only fact of life; everything else is just coincidence.

Specifically, Chaugh is going to die in two and a half minutes. The Doctor is going to realise he has overlooked something vital in six minutes. The Gravis is going to do something monumentally stupid in seven and a half minutes. Everything on the planet will die in ten minutes, when, as has been more than amply foreshadowed, the world is going to end. And the Doctor and Tegan will make a miraculous escape, at least for the time being. But then you knew that already. It's very nearly a fact of life.

However, while not one of them will live beyond the next ten minutes, the Queeth as a species nevertheless survives. Forever. In a manner of speaking.

This is what is known as an exception.

There was quite a crowd of armadillos now, as their numbers were swelled by curious newcomers drifting in from nearby trees. They were grouped around one of the boxy lumps at the base of the Echosphere, where the bottom fifth or so arced gracelessly beneath the mud, barely supported by the plinths of perforated metal around its circumference. These were clearly more than mere pedestals, however, graced as they were by the sort of ribbed metal dome and corrugated fin that said 'higher technology' in a voice even Tegan could hear. Every now and then one of them fell off.

'The Genius of Phoon!' Plong proclaimed from a neighbouring plinth, just as Tegan was plodding up with the unhappy Gravis in tow.

Phoon's Glory, isn't it?' said Kratt, who was curled up around some nearby rusty cabling. 'Wasn't there a memo?'

'Yeah, Trehv ate it,' added Loff.

'Well, whatever,' said Plong. 'Good, isn't it?'

Tegan looked. One side of the nearest pedestal had been ripped off, exposing a mass of metal intestines. Metal tubes wound around blocky pistons and shunt- housings; hoses of ugly, mottled brown

plastics linked broken pipes to blackened valves, to inexplicable little round things with bits sticking out. Something fizzed fitfully in the puddle of dirty rainwater that had collected at the bottom, bright green fluid gulping to the surface from some submerged outlet.

She poked at it with a toe —

'Don't let it touch you! Mentasyntasyntheic acid, or something very like it.'

— and stopped moments before touching the surface, slowly rewinding her movements to squelch her foot squarely back into the mud. You knew where you were with mud.

The Gravis blinked; an impressive sight with its huge eyes, and the first time Tegan had seen it use them for anything more than an impassive stare. 'Mentasynthesis?' it boggled. 'You mean that this is... a mental absorption process? The creatures power their machines with their minds?' As idiot questions went, Tegan had to admit, it beat the pants off her plan of going 'what?'.

The Doctor wore an expression of muted fury. 'Oh, yes, Gravis. Primitive, stupid and ineffective, but yes. This is the source of it all. All their power... those guns... that stupid plan... the Genius of Phoon. A broken fuse-box. It seems Phoon had no more idea about technology than the rest of them. And now they're all dead.'

'What?' asked Tegan, caught off her guard. Dammit.

'Yeah,' said Loff. 'Practically everyone I know. Bike, Namf... Phoon, of course... All the clever ones. Into the bath.'

'Wait a minute...' said Tegan. Something was starting to fall into place in her head. Kratt. Plong. Trehv. All of them. 'The intelligent Queeth killed themselves? So that you lot could survive? The ones who — aren't intelligent?'

Kratt beamed, lopsided head wobbling with pride. Plong nodded so enthusiastically he dropped his gun. Loff dribbled in a faintly

affirmative fashion.

Trehv... was just Trehv. The elite of Queth. And they'd done it on purpose.

She'd been wrong about this planet, Tegan thought. The Gravis could keep it. 'Except that's not quite true, is it?' said the Doctor sharply, interrupting her train of angst. 'There isn't enough power. Not everyone who was supposed to soak themselves in that toxic concoction could bring themselves to do it.' He smiled, just past her shoulder. 'Could you, Chaugh?'

The creature by her ear sniffed dismissively. She craned her head back to get a look at him, scaly and unrepentant on her shoulder, his coiled tails shifting round her upper arm. 'Not much point, was there?' he said morosely, nodding his head at the Doctor with a little click of his mandibles that somehow contrived to come across as a grimace. 'Can't change what's going to happen. That's why it's called "What's going to happen", see. Plus, I'd seen in the Echosphere that I wasn't going to do it, you can see the spot I was in.'

Tegan frowned. 'You seethe future? In the Echosphere?'

The Doctor waved her down with a hand. 'Yes, yes, a phase-space projection, that's what it's for. The Gravis will explain later.'

'Pretty depressing idea, I can tell you that,' said Chaugh, shifting on her shoulder. 'You don't want to see your own death, it takes all the fun out of life.

Eight minutes, by the way.'

'Have we saved the world yet?' asked Kratt, tails flicking merrily across what were probably quite important bits of Echosphere innards. 'Only Trehv needs to go to the toilet.'

'Won't be a problem for long,' Chaugh promised. 'The Doctor wants to have a look in the 'Sphere first, identify the threat. Won't work, of course, but there you are. You can't stop the world ending, or

him trying. But this is where I die.'

'What?' asked the Doctor. *Hah.*

'I've seen it,' said Chaugh. 'I jump into the acid bath, in 38 seconds. None of this lot have got the brains to power it up, so it's gotta be me.' Tegan realised, belatedly, that he was no longer perched six-footed on her shoulder, where he'd been gloomily counting down to their destruction. He'd reared up on his hind legs, tails unwrapping themselves from her arm, and was looking down at the bath of whatever-it-was with an expression of resigned irritation, flexing his multiple knees. 'Thirty-one... '

'What is it doing?' the Gravis asked, alarmed. It jerked its limp antennae, the only result some pinkly redirected drizzle. 'Do not let it jump!'

'Wait a sec, I've got my foot stuck,' grumbled Chaugh. 'I knew this would happen.'

Wait!' Tegan yelped, although she wasn't sure why. He'd been frankly getting on her nerves. 'You don't have to do this. You're a free... thing...'

Scuse me, can you just lift your — Oh, that's got it.'

Tegan forced herself not to grab him by the tails and shake him. 'You can't kill yourself just because you know you're going to! That's not a reason!'

'Tell that to the future. Twelve seconds.'

The Doctor looked aghast. 'Chaugh, please... There has to be another way.'

'Eight, seven... Pity really, there's a good bit coming up in a minute.' Chaugh shrugged. 'I dunno, predestination, eh? Can't live with it... '

They grabbed for him. It was already too late. The scaly body

zipped through the air, tails slipping through Tegan's grasping hands by millimetres, and splashed into the rancid liquid at her feet. She could hear the scales cracking as the acid ate into them, even as his body stiffened into immobility, pitching under the surface like a dropped pencil. The liquid clouded with sudden foam. Something frothed crimson in the liquid. There were... lumps. And then there weren't.

The pool lay still, only dimpled by the rain.

'Horrible...' Tegan whispered. No wonder the poor creature had been so depressed, knowing that was in store for him. She hated herself for letting it happen. Or rather, she decided, she hated everyone else — and especially him. He didn't have to have done it. He could just have walked away. Like her Aunty Vanessa always told her, you always have a choice. You could always —

'Poke it with a stick!' shouted Kratt, scampering eagerly around the machinery to get a closer look. The other armadillos were already clustered in a group around the box, claws flaking rust from every surface as they jostled for a better view.

'Cor,' said Loff, peering down with interest. 'Don't they go a funny colour?'

'Leave it, please...' Tegan choked, staggering away from them, and the Gravis, and its uncomprehending eyes. 'Just leave it.'

The Doctor strode forward. 'That was unnecessary,' he snapped, shooing away the crowd of them to crouch in the mud, studying the mechanical entrails that spilled from the puddle. His hands, tracing the connections, shook. 'A stupid, pointless waste of life. There are a hundred ways to power this machine. A thousand. No one need have died.'

'So?' said Plong, clambering up the ribbed side of one of the 'Sphere's many supports as if to reassert his authority. 'That's what people do, isn't it? Die?'

The Doctor didn't answer. He just set his face in a neutral frown

and fiddled with the taps on the acid-filled tubes. Tegan cast about herself, feeling suddenly alone on this dark, muddy planet. Plong was wrong, she knew that. It was like a little mantra. But everywhere she went, people died. Some of them were robots and some of them were armadillos, and quite a lot of them were actually quite annoying up until the point where they got pointlessly killed, but they were all equally dead. These days she couldn't even remember their names.

'Crikey,' came Kratt's voice from somewhere. 'Is it supposed to do that?'

Tegan looked up, blinking useless tears out of the way. Where moments ago there had been a grotty metal ball, there was... well, there was *still* a grotty metal ball, but now there was something behind it. No, not behind... To one side. Only not any of the sides she was familiar with. All around her, stunned armadillos gaped at the sight. It was as if the globe had become a strange, swollen hole into some other place; a black void filled with a delicate silvery web of infinitely thin strands, glittering with the light of sideways stars.

'What the hell is that?' she asked. If idiot questions were the order of the day, she could at least be an angry idiot.

The Doctor had leapt up on Kratt's words, pressing his hands against the surface of the metal ball — only now they somehow seemed to have moved through the metal, into the void beyond. 'Salvation, if we're lucky,' he muttered, hands deep in a place that shouldn't have existed, pushing and pulling the image into new and confusing configurations. 'It's a five-dimensional image-map of localised phase-space, courtesy of Chaugh's mental energy.'

Gosh, thought Tegan. You live and don't-quite-learn.

'His mind must have provided the last of what was needed to power up the 'Sphere. And just in time, look.' The Doctor pointed to a web of lines that looked, to Tegan's eyes, like any other web of lines, albeit with some pretty unlikely perspective. 'See, there's Queth at the present moment...' He moved his finger in a direction she wasn't entirely familiar with, following the complex routes through

implausible angles as they came to a confused tangle, and then disappeared in an impossible fog of nothing. ‘And there it isn’t, in five minutes time. Chaugh was really very good, you know. There’s a knack to understanding five-space. I’m amazed he could make anything of it at all.’ He gave a bitter half- smile. ‘Hope for them yet. Always assuming, of course, I can find their mysterious enemies, relocate the Schrodinger nexus, adapt Phoon’s technique to work on a non-local target and drop every weapon of matter destruction out of space-time, all without access to the echoic pulse regulators, before they blow up the planet.’ He looked at her. ‘So you might like to stop asking questions for a bit and let me get on with it, hmm?’

He gave her a grim smile and plunged back into the ‘Sphere, leaving her feeling oddly at a loose end for someone with five minutes to live. She slouched off into the mud a little way to escape the excited chatter of the armadillos, who were bickering over what sort of nut a five-dimensional phase-space map was, and stood in the rain feeling pointless.

Away by the ‘Sphere, the water in the broken pedestal stared at her, willing her to admit her failure. Cries of *‘Ulululul’* and ‘Somebody find a bucket!’ drifted past her ears. She tried humming a tune. Four minutes? It was like waiting for an apocalyptic bus.

‘Did the creature... die?’

She turned around, surprised. The woodlouse loomed at her out of the rain, with an expression of unfathomable woe on its stupid face. How long had it been lurking out here, awkward and forgotten? It had been silent since Chaugh had jumped into the acid, she realised; as surplus to requirements as her.

‘You saw it happen, didn’t you?’ she retorted. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘I am sorry, Tegan, I... I find it hard to comprehend. These creatures — they are sentient beings, like you?’

‘Stretches credulity, doesn’t it?’ she muttered, eyes on the distant Trehv, who was trying to untie his tails with his teeth.

‘Then I do not understand. This is what you meant by heroics? To dissolve in acid?’

Tegan shrugged, sidestepping away from the memory.

The Gravis swayed gently in the dark. ‘I do not think I like your exciting adventures with the Doctor, Tegan. There is so much death. Even for heroes. The universe is not as... nice, as I had hoped.’ It stopped, ugly almond eyes shining in the gloom. Tegan held its gaze, uncertain. Surely that was just rain dripping down its cheek? Surely.

‘What?’ came a familiar voice from the Echosphere. ‘But you *must* know!’

It was the Doctor, his cry coloured with anger and just a tinge of panic. She wrenched her gaze away from the woodlouse, half with relief, to see that the crowd around him had grown to a throng, cheering him on as he wrestled with a non-specific armadillo. Honestly, you leave him alone for one minute...

‘You *must* have realised. You can’t be under attack for that long without asking who was doing it!’

She jerked her head at the Gravis, but it was already dragging itself back across the mud towards the ‘Sphere like a faithful, hunchbacked puppy. She’d have laughed at its dogged loyalty if she wasn’t too busy doing exactly the same thing herself, jogging dumbly across some stupid planet to ask questions only an idiot would ask.

‘What’s happening, Doctor?’ she panted, hoping it came across as ironic. They had, she was uncomfortably aware, barely three and a half minutes to Armageddon, and this somehow didn’t look one of those ‘hurray, we have saved the day’ moments.

She arrived well ahead of the lumbering Gravis, to find a calf-high circle of scales and confusion, with the Doctor in the middle, grasping a captive armadillo and practically shaking it in fury.

‘Tell her,’ barked the Doctor, thrusting it at her face as if in demonstration of some incontrovertible proof. It was Plong, she realised, hanging upside down by both tails, to the mixed delight and bewilderment of the new arrivals. ‘Go on! Tell her what you’ve done. All that planning, all that sacrifice — and you don’t even know.’

‘Don’t know what?’ asked a voice from the crowd.

‘That’s what he’s saying! We don’t *know,’* said another, with a distinct lisp.

‘Cor, he knows his stuff, doesn’t he?’

‘Well... I dunno.’

‘You’ve been under attack for your entire history,’ said the Doctor, his face clearly one that had had enough of that sort of thing. ‘You’ve been fleeing as long as your species can remember. Every planet you’ve ever settled on has been destroyed within generations. And you *never asked who by.’*

Tegan recognised Kratt bouncing up and down on a broken metal crag, several hands in the air. ‘Ooh, ooh, I know! The mysterious enemies!’

‘Don’t give me that, a mystery isn’t an answer!’ snapped the Doctor, seeming to reach a pinnacle of breathless fury. He waved at the glowing Echosphere with an irate gesture. ‘There’s nothing in there. I’ve looked. No mysterious enemies, no sudden asteroids, nothing. Queth isn’t destroyed, it just ceases to exist. It just drops out of all contact with the rest of the universe.’

Tegan blinked. ‘But what could do that to a whole... ‘

Vrrum, went the Echosphere. In the gathering dusk the tangled ball of silver thread was the only thing lighting the crater, and it had started to pulse.

Oh. Idiot question.

‘Doctor —’

‘I heard.’

All around, the armadillos were perking up at this turn of events, chattering to one another and saying important things like, ‘It went vrum!’ Plong wriggled in the Doctor’s grip, bending up to see the ‘Sphere, eyes boggling in the silver light.

‘It’s beginning,’ said the Doctor. Thoon got it back to front. His plan won’t save Queth from its fate, it is its fate. The more he tried to change the future, the more fixed it became. Three minutes.’

Vrrum.

But… but… Chaugh couldn’t be right. The future wasn’t fixed. There was always a choice.

‘Stuff predestination,’ Tegan yelled at him. ‘Just reset the controls!’

Vrrum.

The Doctor looked at the ‘Sphere, his expression hopeless. ‘But there isn’t an enemy to target, I can’t anchor the Schrodinger nexus… ‘

‘Forget the enemies, just shift it somewhere else! Wipe out a moon or something.’

Vrrum.

The Doctor wrinkled his forehead, juggling ideas as if they were the threads in the ‘Sphere. He handed Plong to Tegan without looking, cracking his knuckles. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose there might be just *one* chance… ‘

Zzchming.

Not vrrum. Zzchming.

And then, where the phase-space map had been a moment ago, where the ‘Sphere had been before, right in front of where the Doctor was standing, a sphincter of space-time puckered inwards, shrank to a vanishing point of nothing and popped out of existence. The Echosphere was gone. The world shook.

‘Hurrah!’ cried the Gravis, antennae wiggling wonkily in enthusiasm. ‘I have saved the day!’ It was standing in the mud behind where the ‘Sphere had been, stained and bedraggled and vibrating with triumph. One flipper-shaped paw was wrapped around a tiny, bulb-shaped lump of metal. Plong’s gun. Tegan had wondered where it had got to.

‘I. have saved the day, haven’t I?’ asked the woodlouse, a tremor in its voice.

As if in answer, the ground lurched suddenly under Tegan’s feet, throwing her against a jutting cable support with enough force to ping-pong Plong into the mud. There was a grinding howl from deep beneath the earth, rocks rumbling against one another with the distant echoes of a sound like *zzchming.* The trailing cables around the now vacant centre of the crater snapped and groaned as they rode the shifting ground. A torrent of armadillos swept past, surfing a current of mud and going ‘whee!’

‘It’s an earthquake!’ shouted Tegan, wishing she hadn’t felt the need to. ‘Tectonic disruption, certainly!’ the Doctor shouted back, fighting to keep his balance on the ever-shifting mud. ‘Lumps of the planet disappearing, disturbing the balance of the geological plane!’

‘What, and that’s different enough to be worth pointing out right now, is it?’ she yelled back.

‘It is if it means the TARDIS is closer than it was. Right, change of plan!’ he shouted, his voice rising as the ground bucked beneath him. ‘Evacuation time! The process is irreversible without the Echosphere, but there’s still one place we’ll be safe. Plong! Kratt! Loff! Organise everyone you can and get them up to the cave near where you found us. You’ll know the one, it’s full of liverwort and a

big blue box.'

'What, put them all in the TARDIS?' yelled Tegan. 'Won't that get you in trouble with the Time Lords?'

'Desperate times, Tegan,' said the Doctor shortly. 'Come on! All of you!'

And with that, he grabbed an armadillo in each hand and set off, fighting to stay vertical against the shuddering of the land as he pounded through the mud in the direction they had first come. Like some mad cricketing pied piper, he was followed by a trickle, then a flood of armadillos, swinging through the trees, scampering across the mud on all six legs, and asking impatiently if they were nearly there.

'Where are we going again?' they gargled to one another.

'Evacuation, he said.'

'Where's that?'

The ground bucked and shook, squeezing and shrinking to accommodate the bubbles of space imploding out of existence all around, occasionally wiping out some unlucky armadillos as the crater grew smaller by fifty-yard bites. Tegan started after them, the grey-brown flood flowing uphill towards the ever-closer site of the TARDIS, and safety. But, inevitably, she found her head turning back towards the 'Sphere, or where it had been until recently. There was a large, round hollow there now, subsidence or warped space from a particularly mighty *zzchming* not far beneath. And slumped in it, half rolled into a ball and making a horrible blarting noise, was the Gravis.

It might have been crying. It might have been going to the toilet. But Tegan was, to her constant irritation, a nice person at heart.

'Gravis?' she asked gingerly, wondering vaguely if the fact that the planet was being wiped out of time as well as space meant they'd have longer or shorter to get away. 'Are you okay?'

The Gravis looked at her with huge, wet eyes as she approached. Of course that might just have been because Tractators have huge, wet eyes, but she had a feeling that this time it meant something. ‘You must leave me,’ it croaked as she drew near. ‘I think I’ve sprained my metatarsus. And... I have doomed a planet to oblivion. I deserve to die.’

Tegan looked at it, down in its hole. Oh, the temptation. ‘You’ve changed your tune, haven’t you? Look what you were going to do to Frontios.’

It gazed at nothing, anguished eyes shining in the darkness. ‘I only planned to give it a gravity engine,’ it pleaded. ‘Make it mobile. I thought... I thought space travel would be *fun.’*

‘Yeah. So did I, once,’ said Tegan, surprised by the bitterness in her voice. Out of the corner of her mind’s eye, she could see Aunty Vanessa glowering at her, unimpressed.

So this thing had doomed a few planets. Who hadn’t, these days? It had made a few wrong choices... but at least it had made them.

Tegan made one too.

She tottered down into the hollow, grabbed the woodlouse under its stubby paws, and yanked it to whatever it used for feet. The crater was barely more than a dip in the ground now, the ground lurching every other second as the planet ate itself into nothing. The cave with the TARDIS, if it was still there, could only be a hundred yards or so away.

‘Brave heart, Gravis,’ Tegan muttered. She took the Tractator’s weight on her shoulders, and together, wheezing and groaning, they trudged up the hill behind the last of the struggling armadillos.

They might even make it.

Two minutes later, Queth ended. Told you.

It was a wasteland. A cold, cracked plane strewn with rocks and boulders, zigzag fractures exposing the darkness beneath. Scant stars shone bravely in the utter blackness above, pinpoint steady in the thin air.

'What's this?' said Kratt. 'This is *rubbish.'*

'What are we going to *eat?'*

Tegan ignored them, picking her way across the fractured landscape to findsome stable ground. The laundry vortex in the TARDIS had done a good job of returning her clothes and hair to their former glory, but she didn't fancy her chances with these heels.

Behind her, the Doctor shaded his eyes from the non-existent sun to look out over the vast expanse of nothing very much. 'Well, here we are!' he said infuriatingly. She exchanged glances with the Gravis, who rolled its eyes. It wasn't buying it.

She gave in. 'Here we are where?'

The Doctor grinned, unrolling his stupid yellow hat. 'Exactly where we were, I hope. A few light years from the Yyb Fissure, second star on the right and straight on till...' He caught Tegan's look just in time. 'Kolkokron,' he finished. 'Straightforward materialisation reboot, except that now space-time has shifted to repair the hole where Queth used to be. Hence the original mix-up with the coordinates, you see.'

Tegan didn't, but she saw no reason to point this out. 'And this is where we're leaving the arma— the Queeth, is it? They don't seem too pleased.'

The Doctor gave a distracted glance at the dozen or so creatures around them — a tiny sample of the hundreds currently stowed away in the TARDIS, clinging on to roundels, hanging from the hat stand and turning up unexpectedly in Tegan's wardrobe. 'Ah, well, no,' he said, with a preoccupied air. 'Can't disrupt the timelines, you see. They have their own destiny.'

They watched as a Queeth rolled past their feet, probably the victim of yet another argument about who exactly the mysterious enemies were who had blown up the planet. Away in the distance she could hear Plong shouting about condom physics. It could only be a matter of time before Trehv trod in something important.

‘Talking of which…’ The Doctor turned to the Gravis with a cough. He was looking suddenly awkward, Tegan realised, hat bashed on to his head and both hands stuck in his pockets. Abruptly, she remembered why they’d left Frontios in the first place. To abandon the woodlouse here. Not that that wasn’t exactly what it deserved, she’d do it herself in an instant if she had the opportunity, only…

Only…

The Gravis oscillated gently on the spot, looking as expectant as could reasonably be asked of something with no facial muscles.

‘I’m afraid this isn’t going to be easy for either of us, Gravis, said the Doctor. ‘I’m not very good at goodbyes, and you have proved yourself a very able companion, but the fact is —’

The woodlouse wobbled. ‘No,’ it said.

The Doctor was taken aback. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘No, Doctor,’ said the Gravis. It reared itself up backwards, antennae raised in what seemed like determination. ‘I know what you would ask, but I must decline. I cannot become your companion.’

The Doctor drew a puzzled breath. Tegan kicked him before he could say anything. He could be really very stupid sometimes.

‘The truth is… I do not like space travel, Doctor,’ rasped the Gravis, a hint of shame in its croaky voice. ‘I like… rocks. Rocks do not kill people, or have to make terrible decisions. Or do brave things and then die. They are just rocks.’ It paused, the far-off whoops of colliding armadillos punctuating the silence. ‘Forgive me, Tegan. I am not brave or heroic like you. I shall remain on Kolkokron.’

The Doctor looked... Well, it would be hard to say how he looked. Whatever it was, he covered it up quickly, forcing a cheery grin. ‘Well, there we are, then!’ he beamed, or tried to. ‘Kolkokron. Yes, why not. Plenty of rare n-waves to feed on, solar flare activity minimal...’ He bounced gently on the balls of his plimsolls, taking off his hat to glance up at the sky. ‘Gravity playful but not too cheeky. A splendid choice.’

An odd look passed across his face: part relief, part dejection. He held out a hand to the Gravis, who looked at it in alarm. ‘Well, no hard feelings,’ the Doctor said manfully. ‘Probably for the best in the long run, the old girl’s getting a bit full up, what with air hostesses and androids and things. And let’s face it, you would never have fitted in an air duct.’

He grabbed the woodlouse’s unsuspecting flipper and gave it an affirming shake that made the whole creature wobble. With a last, irresolute nod, he turned on his heel, raising his voices to the armadillos, still rushing around contradicting one another and falling off things. ‘Come along, Plong! All of you! Change of scenery.’

‘What’s a scenery?’ asked gargly chicken voices as they rounded themselves up and fell off things.

‘It doesn’t matter, he’s changed it.’

‘Yes, but what *into?’*

‘ *Ulululu!*

Perched on their spur of rock, the Gravis sucked the dangly worm-things back into its mouth with a shuddery breath. It might, Tegan realised, be the Tractator equivalent of a stiff upper lip. ‘Farewell, Tegan,’ it croaked. ‘I hope... you make a braver choice than I.’

She looked at it. Horrible thing. She was glad to be rid of it.

‘Oh, Gravis,’ she said. ‘I will miss you.’

If there was a message in the look it gave her, Tegan couldn't read it. But she could still feel it standing resolutely behind her as she tottered back to the TARDIS, heels catching in every fissure. Back to comfort, back to the routine, back to the big blue box, where the Doctor was urging the remainder of the Queeth across the threshold. Back to being an idiot. *And* she'd broken her heel. She refused to look back.

'One unwanted passenger down, 400 annoyed armadillos to go,' she snapped, her usual filthy mood restored. 'What are we going to do with them?'

The Doctor picked up a particularly dense armadillo who was trying to walk through the wall and threw it inside. 'I told you, they have a destiny. We'll take them back to Queth.'

She gave him a look. 'But... Queth's been destroyed... '

'It is a time machine, Tegan. We'll drop them off 300 years or so ago, that should give them time to evolve the sort of intelligence they've just wiped out.'

The Doctor located the last of the wandering armadillos, pushing them none too gently through the oblong of darkness into an unseen space filled with ululating confusion and cries of, 'You're standing on my *toe.'*

'So... wait a minute, they'll be their own ancestors?'

'Explains a lot. Nothing like inbreeding to grow yourself a Phoon or two.' 'And... what they were saying about every planet they'd settled on being destroyed... '

'All Queth. All the same event, infinitely looped.'

'And when you asked what senseless idiot had taught them about the Schrodinger's Cat Principle? That was actually — '

'Yes, thank you very much for pointing that out, Tegan.'

She stared at him. Her head whirled. ‘But isn’t that creating a, you know, a paradox? What about the laws of time?’

‘It’s been a long day, Tegan,’ said the Doctor wearily, rolling up his hat. ‘Let’s just let time work things out for itself for once, shall we?’

Tegan fought to understand. So the Queeth would flee from Queth to Queth; evolve, and flee from Queth to Queth... Always remembering that their last planet had been destroyed... Always exploiting the Echosphere they’d find to keep this planet safe... Always killing Chaugh, and destroying the planet, and fleeing from Queth to Queth. Trapped doing the same idiotic, obvious things, forever.

Round and round the circle went...

‘Tegan? Are you ready?’

The Doctor stood at the doors of his silly little spaceship, one arm flung into the blackness within, towards the sound of argumentative squeaking.

So, drop this lot off, and back to Frontios. And then — who knew. Heroism. Deaths unaccountable. Capture, escape, corridors; corridors, capture, escape. Round and round the circle went.

She gave in and looked back at the Gravis, already merrily levitating rocks into the beginnings of a makeshift tunnel, back where it belonged. Maybe she really was an idiot. Or maybe it was time to be brave at last. Maybe it was time to choose. That was the thing about destiny. You couldn’t live with it —

* * *

Queth ended.

And then, 300 years earlier, a box appeared. Four hundred squashed and weary passengers disembarked, looked around them in confusion, and vowed— those with the wit to do so — that this would be the last time. That they would not lose this New Queth. Whatever sacrifice it

took, whatever tools they could find, this time things would be different.

And Queth lurched towards its fate, threading an n-dimensional line through existence towards its inevitable termination.

This is why phase-space is so dull. Things cannot change. The five-dimensional line of existence cannot twist at will through space and time: discontinuous, inconsistent, lurching from catastrophe in the far future to disaster in the distant past, to a life in the present, suddenly resumed. Destiny is just that. You don't get to pick the one you want. You cannot choose your own adventure.

That's what makes real life so exciting.

Short Trips: The Centenarian

Short Trips: The Centenarian really is my favourite book in the whole world.

The preceding anthology, Farewells, had been planned as the final ever collection - but then BBC Worldwide went and extended our licence! So, in my head at least, The *Centenarian* marked the start of new sequence in the range.

And because of that, we wanted to do something a bit different...

It all started simply enough. The idea was to do a short-story collection that was, let's be honest, actually a novel. Each chapter would be a self-contained piece but, when read as a whole, characters and plots and themes would crossover from story to story.

One of the first writers I commissioned, Steven Savile, mentioned to me that he knew someone who'd be keen on contributing - Stel Pavlou, a novelist and the writer of the movie The 51st State. How could I resist someone who's written for Samuel L. Jackson? I just hoped his ideas would be fit in with our plans. Stel emailed me on 28 June 2005 with two brief story pitches, one of which leapt out immediately: a spy story set at Checkpoint Charlie in 1962.

'It's the height of the cold war,' the email read, 'and the Centenarian [our lead character didn't have a name at this point] is a Government official sent to collect a spy due to cross over from East Berlin and get him back to London.' When I read Stel's full outline on 5 August, I was intrigued even further. Just look at its opening paragraph: The Centenarian is waiting on the western side of Checkpoint Charlie. It's a cold winter's night, and the coffee from the guard hut is welcome. Tonight, the cold war truly is cold.'

How brilliant is that? It's so evocative. It instantly grabs you, makes you want to read on. And that sums up both this story and Stel's writing in general. The prose in Checkpoint is simply sublime. It's

not just a West Berlin setting that recalls Ian Fleming's The *living* Daylights, one of the finest short stories ever written. It's the sharp, clear storytelling, the richly textured setting and the engrossing characters.

Another thing, of course, that Stel had to do was make sure his story fitted in with the rest of the collection. The Centenarian's arc was the life story of Edward Grainger, from his birth in 1906 until his death a hundred years later. He repeatedly meets various Doctors, but at the point of Checkpoint he was only just beginning to see that all these strange men were connected. Stel also took the opportunity to reference other stories in the book. The gag about the Doctor looking like someone called George Tremayne is following up Brian Willis's superb Ancient Whispers, the same story that introduced Sergeant Major Munro. Edward's wife, Eleanor, had appeared in four previous stories.

Getting Stel into the Short Trips range was a bit of a coup, one which still fills me with pride, and I'm chuffed that he went on to write for two further collections. Go and check out his stories in Snapshots and Destination *Prague* - they're just as brilliant.

Checkpoint
Stel Pavlou

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,
with Romanadvoratrelundar

Wednesday 10 October 1962. West Berlin.

Stempfer was late.

Edward Grainger stood on the western edge ofCheckpoint Charlie, a steaming cup of strong coffee from the guard but clutched in one hand. It was a welcome relief from the bite of the cold night air. He could feel it in his knee the most. A chilling damp that penetrated right to the bone. He was 56 years old. There had to be more to life than this.

He had grown to despise Berlin. Had he any good memories ofthis place? And now that the Wall had come down like a surgeon's knife through gangrened flesh he wondered if the patient would ever recover.

Grainger paced agitatedly. He checked his watch again.

Eleanor would be playing canasta right now.

All he had for company was the glare of East German searchlights sweeping down the lengths of miserable cement.

How did anybody have the courage to make a break for it through that lot? For goodness's sake, just getting close to the wall was a miracle in itself. All Stempfer had to do was slip up once and the Stasi would know everything. In East Germany, one civilian in fifty was a Stasi informant. One casual remark to the wrong person.

That's all it took.

Perhaps he'd aborted? Perhaps. It was better than reporting back to

London that they'd lost another spy. The paperwork was a wretched inconvenience.

Grainger pulled his collar up tight around his neck when a policeman came striding purposefully from the hut. His German was clipped but hopeful. They'd spotted movement on the other side.

He strained to see. It was so dark. Two Volks Polizei appeared to have cornered a man and were directing him to a document check. The man fumbled for his papers in the deep pockets of a long overcoat.

Grainger couldn't see his face. He had a hat pulled right down over it. 'Is that him?' the policeman asked with apprehension.

Grainger replied honestly. 'I don't know.'

He'd never met Stempfer. He was just a name pencilled into a notebook given to him by Control.

They'd insisted Stempfer be handed off to a new, far more experienced handler. The information he'd been relaying was too explosive to be worked by a junior - so they sent Grainger, 11 years past mandatory retirement age for fieldwork. Currently just a glorified office boy who'd been promised that, at his age, he could twiddle his thumbs to his pension.

Eleanor was right. Her Majesty's Secret Service. Liars, the lot of them. All this cloak-and-dagger nonsense was young man's sport.

The lone figure stepped out of the but on the other side. Tucking his papers away, he tipped his hat to the East German crossing guards and strolled across the divide in a frigid cloud of his own breath, as though he'd just enjoyed a rather fine meal and needed to stretch his legs for a bit.

Grainger plonked his cup back down inside the hut, just in case, and readied himself for the long debrief ahead. Was this really him? He stepped up to the simple white line painted on the road.

The approaching figure threw the dangling end of a long scarf over his shoulder. As the light hit his face, Grainger was struck instantly by the familiarity of it. Wide, lively eyes and teeth like tombstones, crammed inside a grinning mouth.

‘Good grief…’

He looked just like George Tremayne, back during the Berlin airlift. All that business with the peculiar bricked-up house. It was all so fresh in his mind. But that had to be ten, 15 years ago. It couldn’t be Tremayne. Tremayne was dead.

‘Well…’ the approaching man announced mischievously. ‘How did I know it was going to be you?’

Grainger took a moment to formulate his response, but events started to run quicker than his wits.

Across the divide a telephone began to ring in the distance. The Volks Polizei hurriedly took the call, then immediately began arguing over its implications.

Suddenly, a glaring searchlight bore down on the man in the scarf and hat. An order, in barked German, came for him to stop and return to the checkpoint.

The man cocked his head, as though thinking it over. At precisely what moment he decided that the line painted at Grainger’s feet was simply too tempting: Grainger couldn’t be sure. But his action was set.

He broke into a run.

And that was when the shot rang out.

It wasn’t that there was so much blood that Grainger noticed first. It was that on such a cold night, as it struck his face, it was so very warm. The man in the hat, Tremayne’s doppelganger or whoever he was, let out such a cry, clutching his shoulder he began to fall

awkwardly. Grainger, without even thinking, dashed across the line to cradle him.

The West German police complained bitterly. He wasn't permitted across the line. But Grainger's fury came as something of a shock to them.

'Take aim!' he roared. 'I'm not having another Fechter on ours hands! If they so much as twitch, you open fire! Do you understand me?'

The men dithered. The whole world had seen poor Peter Fechter splashed across the front pages only two months ago. Eighteen years old. Shot in the hip trying to flee East Berlin. Left to die hanging on the barbed wire. No one in the West able to do a thing because he was just a few yards inside the Russian sector.

Not again.

The West Germans brandished their weapons at the East Germans, though it wasn't altogether clear if they would follow Grainger's order. What did become clear was Grainger's gritted determination. On his own, and in the face of approaching East German sentries, he grabbed the man, who was twice his size, and dragged him by his coat tails until he lay bleeding, firmly in the West.

The man, who was now so weak from his injury that his breathing had become shallow, buckled under the assault of Grainger's sudden questioning.

The man struggled to answer.

Frustrated, Grainger reduced it down to just the important one. 'Are you Stempfer?' he asked.

The man smiled wanly. 'No, I'm the Doctor,'

'I'm going to get you a doctor. I just need to know about Stempfer.'

'Stempfer...?'

‘Yes.’

‘Stempfer... No, I’m not Stempfer,’ the man confessed, steadily losing consciousness. ‘Stempfer’ s dead.’

Grainger took the blow with resolve. ‘How?’ he persisted.

‘I think I killed him.’

Keeping the Americans out of it had been something of feat. This was their sector, their jurisdiction. But they kept their word, and when Grainger had a British army ambulance, a converted Land Rover from RAF Gatow, in attendance within ten minutes, they raced down the narrow length of Friedrichstasse and off into the dark side streets of West Berlin. Nobody stopped them.

Grainger rifled through the deep pockets of the stranger’s overcoat, stopping only occasionally to watch the young army medic, a boy really, work feverishly in the dim, cramped conditions across the other side of the stretcher.

What was this?

He pulled out what appeared to be some kind of pen, maybe a screwdriver, from one of the side pockets. It had a light on the end. How very curious. It seemed to hum.

Good grief, there were all sorts of odds and ends in here. A yo-yo, some elastic bands. Heaven knows what that thing was and... hang on. He pulled a paper bag out and peeked at its contents. Yes, it really was a bag of jelly babies.

‘I think you’re in luck,’ the medic announced as he probed and cleaned the wound of Tremayne’s unconscious doppelganger. ‘The bullet doesn’t seem to have punctured the axillary artery.’

‘You’re sure? I need to question him.’

‘I can’t be completely sure,’ the medic confessed. The bleeding

certainly did appear to have slowed. ‘He could be bleeding internally.’ He applied a new dressing but it was obvious something else was bothering him. He smirked sheepishly. ‘Though I can’t actually seem to find his axillary artery...’

Grainger didn’t care about that. The strong smell of disinfectant that permeated throughout the ambulance was starting to make him feel decidedly uneasy. He could feel his hands turning clammy to the drum of distant, uncomfortable memories.

As he watched the medic press firmly against the bloody dressing, he didn’t mean to make eye contact.

‘I say, are you all right?’

It took all of Grainger’s effort to ignore him and look away. He thought about stealing a jelly baby to take his mind off things, but opted to stuff them back inside the coat pocket instead.

‘It’s all right, sir,’ the medic reassured him, apparently assuming that Grainger had somehow made it this far through life without having seen any bloodshed before now. ‘We’ll be back at Gatow in a minute and we’ll have you and your, er, guest on your way back to London before you know it.’

Grainger dismissed his youthful enthusiasm. That wasn’t about to happen. Not now. The interrogation had to begin immediately. Tonight. He said, ‘We’re not going to Gatow. We’re going to

Wilmersdorf.’

The younger man seemed confused. He didn’t think there was anything in Wilmersdorf.

‘Nothing you need to worry about, at any rate,’ Grainger replied testily. He wouldn’t say any more than that, though they both knew the real reason why.

It had been all change in West Berlin, ever since last year. Grainger’s first port of call would have been Charlottenburg but

that was all over now. Safe houses had been moved. Networks smashed and rebuilt. All because of that filthy swine George Blake, a Soviet triple agent unmasked right in the heart of British intelligence. Hundreds of agents betrayed and executed at his behest.

Rumour had it there was still another rat in the pack somewhere. Grainger had his money on Philby but he couldn't be sure. There was just something about that smug face that he didn't like. So long as he stayed in the Middle East, well out of his patch, that's all he cared about.

Grainger fished around in the coat pockets again and this time dug a little deeper.

Ah-ha, what's this... ?

Small, nondescript and tatty. At last. A codebook.

He slipped it quickly into his own coat pocket, but the medic's confusion had not lifted any. He was feeling for a pulse and becoming increasingly suspicious of his own abilities. He reeled from his patient as though the unconscious man on the stretcher had given him a fright. 'There' s something very strange about this man's heartbeat.'

'What's the matter?'

The medic seemed almost embarrassed to answer. 'I could swear he's got two of them.'

Grainger changed his mind and decided to pilfer a jelly baby after all. 'You need to lay off the rubbing alcohol, old chap.'

From the outside, it looked like an ordinary, narrow apartment building somewhere near Olivaer Platz. Five floors. Dark and not particularly well kept.

The Land Rover pulled into a side street and parked in seclusion at the rear, well away from street lights and prying eyes. Grainger got

out, lit a rough-tasting cigarette, and waited in the darkness until he heard the approach of heavy footsteps echoing down the stairwell behind the heavy back door.

Two burly men emerged. They said nothing. They waited for Grainger to open up the Land Rover, then hefted the stretcher out quickly.

The medic motioned to follow but Grainger gently pushed him back inside. He thanked him for his services and followed the men up the bleak stairs.

Somewhere around the third floor they entered one of the grotty apartments and hefted the stretcher into a back room at the end of the hall.

It was worse in here. Like an abattoir. White tiles from floor to ceiling, held in place by ageing grout. A trolley lay next to the gurney bearing gleaming surgical instruments, which glinted under the glare of a single incandescent bulb that swung gently back and forth overhead.

When the surgeon came in to inspect his patient, Grainger could feel the blood draining from his face. He loitered in the doorway and watched him work distrustfully for a minute or two before quietly slipping back out.

The two burly men were listening to a wireless and eating a meal of cold meat and potatoes at a table in the tiny kitchen. Grainger stepped inside briefly, pulled a bottle ofbrandy out from the sink cupboard and poured himself a shot in a dusty glass.

It was as he turned to leave that he realised he recognised one of the men. A little greyer, perhaps a little craggier.

‘Sergeant Munro, isn’t it?’

‘Sergeant Major Munro, thank you very much,’ the man corrected brusquely, before looking up. ‘Good grief. Mr Grainger, sir.’ He got to his feet quickly, wiped his hand and shook Grainger’s hand. ‘It’s

been a long time.'

'So you made it to Warrant Officer.' Grainger smiled. 'Hard to tell who we all were out in there in the dark, eh?'

Munro stepped a little closer, the concern weighing heavily on him. 'Not so dark that I didn't notice, sir.'

'Notice what?'

'That it looks like our Mr Tremayne is back from the dead, if you get my meaning.'

'Quite.'

'I'm wondering what the Soviets are up to. You don't think he's some kind ofruse do you, sir?'

'What? Shoot one of their own men, just so we'll believe him?'

'I wouldn't put it past 'em.'

Grainger swigged his brandy down quickly and set the glass on the side. 'Seems a bit extreme, even for them,' he said. But the doubt lingered.

At any rate, it came as something of a relief to know that he wasn't the only one seeing things. And to know that he had an ally here should things take a turn, and he didn't have to say another word about it.

He made his way to what would have been a lounge had this been an ordinary apartment. Instead, two large wooden desks and a threadbare couch were all that filled an otherwise drab and spartan room.

At one end sat wireless equipment rigged up to a Too-kilowatt, amplitude-modulated Class B shortwave radio transmitter up on the roof.

The radio operator, a thin, middle-aged intelligence officer by the name of Carstairs, made it clear that Control were anxious that Grainger check in.

‘They’re always anxious,’ he said, and handed the small codebook over for analysis.

‘This is Stempfer’s handwriting, all right,’ Carstairs confirmed. ‘I’d recognise it anywhere.’

That, however, was the extent to which Carstairs could tell him anything. The message was encrypted with an unbreakable One Time Pad. The key was with Control. He’d have to send them the message, wait for them to decrypt it, and only if they deemed Grainger important enough to the overall scheme would they contact him and issue further instructions.

Grainger ordered Carstairs to get cracking. Other agents out in the field would be tuning in on wirelesses all over Europe waiting for their own sets of coded instructions to be broadcast by the Wilmersdorf Number Station. They couldn’t afford to tie up the system for long. But Control had to get the message; they needed to know Stempfer was dead, and that a stranger had taken his place.

‘A stranger who doesn’t appear to have much of a wound at all,’ the surgeon announced a little while later, standing in the doorway, taking off his gloves.

‘He was shot right in front of me.’

‘Clipped, more like.’

‘I’m covered in his blood.’

‘Dear me, I didn’t take you for the melodramatic type.’ The surgeon slumped on the couch and tiredly asked if anybody had a spare cigarette. Grainger dug his packet out and joined him, but just like the other one it tasted bitter and unpleasant.

He got to his feet, suspicion still ringing in his ears. ‘You didn’t find

anything peculiar about his heartbeat by any chance, did you?'

'I wouldn't know, I didn't check. There didn't seem to be much point. I sutured what was there, but there really wasn't much else I could do.'

'Well, stick around just in case there are complications.'

'Fine,' the surgeon acquiesced, breathing in a lungful ofthick blue smoke. 'But there won't be any.' The surgeon sighed. 'Personally, I thought he seemed perfectly lucid. But... not exactly *compos mentis,* if you get my drift.'

'He's awake?'

'I put him in the back room. When I left him he was sitting there, having a conversation with a cockroach and demanding to be addressed as Doctor.'

The back room was fairly large, but equally spartan. Its only window had been boarded up and a scruffy table and two chairs had been placed at its centre.

The stranger was sitting on the far side of the table, his shirt ripped open exposing his pale torso.

Grainger found Munro standing guard outside. Sure enough the stranger had what appeared to be a small brown cockroach sitting in the palm of his hand - and he was arguing with it.

Though Grainger couldn't hear what was being said through the thick glass of the door, he could see him well enough to know that there were no signs of the Logos symbols burned into his flesh.

In fact, in this light he could see clearly that this certainly wasn't Tremayne. But, still, the likeness was disturbingly uncanny. And he was equally as peculiar as the last and final time Grainger had laid eyes on his old friend.

Munro made it clear that he was having none of it. This was a

game. The question was what sort of game were the Soviets up to this time?

Suddenly the man in the room flinched as though he'd been bitten and threw the insect across the room.

He sucked his finger to ease the pain and shouted. 'How rude!' Grainger took the opportunity of the distraction to step inside and approached with caution. 'Is there a problem?' he asked flatly.

'Ambassador Skgar is being very unreasonable.'

Grainger glanced at the scuttling creature in the corner, its twitching antennae aimed at nothing in particular, but said nothing.

The stranger, however, scoffed at it. 'Yes, well...' he said, addressing the insect directly. 'The feeling's mutual.'

Grainger took a seat across the table and took a quick puff on his unpleasant cigarette. 'Something you want to tell me?'

The man grinned playfully, his wide eyes filled with mischief. 'Yes... It's good to see you, Eddie.'

Grainger remained impassive. 'You grin a lot,' he said.

'Maybe I have a lot to grin about.'

'Who are you?'

Right to the point. That seemed to give the man a moment's pause.

Eventually he said, 'It's me. The Doctor.'

'Which Doctor?'

'Oh, no, I'm not a witch doctor.' The stranger got to his feet. 'Oh, come on, Eddie. I can call you Eddie, can't I?'

'No, you can't.'

‘Of course I can. Eddie. See? There, I said it again.’ He bounded over to the corner of the room. ‘We have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘Because of Tremayne.’

‘What?’ The stranger seemed genuinely befuddled, until it suddenly hit him. He rubbed his own face, testing its contours, as the realisation dawned. ‘Oh, yes, I do a bit, don’t I? Funny what can happen when the universe gets rewritten, eh?’

The man calling himself the Doctor grinned once again, but this time there was far more behind the toothy smile than mere playful banter. It was quite chilling. Grainger watched him quickly scoop the cockroach back up again and, carrying it back towards the table, say, ‘Now, are you going to behave yourself or am I going to have to put you back in the box?’

The answer seemed to satisfy and he set it down.

The Doctor...

Not a doctor. The Doctor. The definite article.

This wasn’t the first time he had met someone who called himself the Doctor. There had been a few. They clearly weren’t all the same man, so how could they all be the Doctor?

What was he missing?

Was it some kind of secret code? Or a secret society? Like the Masons. No. The Masons never came up to you and said, Hello, I’m the Mason. They said they were a Mason, if they admitted it at all.

‘Why is that man staring at me?’ the Doctor asked with an air of alarm. Grainger glanced over his shoulder to see Munro looming through the glass in the door.

‘He’d prefer it if you sat down.’

‘Why?’

‘Because otherwise he might take a disliking to you.’

‘Oh.’ The man calling himself the Doctor seemed to take a moment to consider his limited options. ‘That would be very unpleasant.’

He sat down.

After a moment, his focus clearly on other matters, he waved his hand at the cockroach. ‘What? No, no, you stay where you are.’ Grainger tapped his ash out. ‘Tell me what happened to Stempfer.’

‘I told you, he’s dead.’

‘You admitted you killed him. How?’

The Doctor sat back, the memory clearly troubling. ‘I really don’t want to talk about it.’

‘I want to talk about it.’

‘Well, why do we have to talk about what you want to talk about all the time?’

Enough of these silly games. Grainger felt the sudden surge of uncharacteristic anger and embraced it. ‘That’s how it works!’

The two men sat in aggravated silence for a moment, until eventually the Doctor decided to fill the void.

‘If you really must know, he found out what was going on. He told me… And I asked him to go back and get me more information. At which point, they hunted him down like vermin, and starved him to death.’

Grainger had never heard anything like it. Executed, yes, but starved? ‘The Stasi did this?’

‘No,’ the Doctor explained, ‘something much worse, something that

is using the Stasi, and the KGB and everybody else in between for its own purposes.' He held Grainger's gaze with a steely one of his own that made the hairs on the back of Grainger's neck stand on end. 'There are creatures that feed on human misery.'

'Yes,' Grainger agreed. 'They're called communists '

'These communists call themselves the Jalaphron.'

'The Jalaphron? A political group, like Bolsheviks?'

The Doctor appeared perturbed that Grainger didn't understand. 'Oh, dear. No, not like Bolsheviks.'

'Then what?'

The Doctor seemed to seriously think it over before turning Grainger's attention back to the small, beady-eyed cockroach. 'Perhaps Ambassador Skgar here would be -'

'I see... ' More games.

Grainger took the initiative and decided to plough ahead with what he was really interested in. He took the codebook out and set it on the table. 'Do you recognise this?'

'Hmm, isn't that Stempfer's?'

'You tell me.'

'Yes, I think that's Stempfer's. I could probably tell you for certain if I knew where my coat was. You don't happen to know where my coat is, do you?'

'I got this from your coat.'

The Doctor was mortified. 'Well, who said you could do that?'

'What does it say?'

‘You want me to read it? It’s in code.’

‘Tell me anyway,’ Grainger demanded irritably.

‘All right, it says Cuba.’

Cuba? Another game? Grainger had no idea what it said; Control hadn’t responded yet. But for now, he would pursue this line.

He took a pen out and on a small scrap of paper wrote the word Cuba. The stranger seemed rueful. ‘Well, it’s not a very good code.’ ‘It’s a One Time Pad. It’s supposed to be unbreakable.’

‘Unbreakable, I suppose, if you’re not familiar with the poem used in the key to decode it.’

‘Tell me, what’s in Cuba?’

‘It’s full of Cubans. Lovely people. Good dancers. Have you been?’

‘Stop being so flippant!’

‘You first.’

Grainger took a final, irritated drag on his awful cigarette before stubbing it out on the table with a twist of complete finality.

‘You already knew about Cuba.’

Suddenly the Doctor didn’t seem quite so amused. ‘You’re a very important man, Eddie. You’re going to stop a war.’

‘And why would I want to do that?’

The Doctor seemed genuinely hurt. ‘Well, it’s better than starting one. Isn’t it? Wars are bad. I’m sure you’ll agree.’

‘What’s so bad about them?’

‘Well, haven’t you heard? People die.’

‘I have lived through one or two of them, you know.’

‘Then I would have thought you’d know that by now.’ He tapped the desk under Grainger’s nose. ‘When your people have finished decoding that message, this is what they’re going to find. They’re going to find that a man named Oleg Penkovsky gave Stempfer the map coordinates to the sites on Cuba from where Soviet missiles are being placed to launch an attack on the United States of America. Which, in turn, will cause a NATO counter-attack and bring death to millions.

‘But we can stop it, Eddie. You and me, in Berlin, tonight.’

Grainger watched carefully as Carstairs transcribed the reply from London, but it was so difficult to concentrate with the sound of all that blood rushing through his ears.

Why did Carstairs have to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose and make that rasping sound, like a demented pig? It was disgusting.

Come to think of it, why did he have to breathe at all?

Grainger wanted to throttle him. Throttle him. Then hit him. Hit him hard and keep hitting him -

‘Got it,’ Carstairs announced proudly.

He turned to where Grainger was pacing agitatedly and held out the decoded message from Control.

‘You read it,’ Grainger snapped.

‘Cuba is hot. Reconnaissance scrambled. Hold for further instructions.’

So it was true, what this Doctor fellow had been telling him. It was all true. The Soviets really were placing missiles in Cuba, just ninety miles off the coast ofFlorida.

This was the fallout from President Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco last year that everyone had been waiting for.

Send fifteen hundred armed Cuban exiles back into Cuba to spark a popular uprising. Fail miserably. Watch nearly twelve hundred of them get caught, sentenced to thirty years' imprisonment. And Castro's response is to arrange for Soviet missiles to be stationed in his back garden.

This could escalate wildly out of control.

The world was sitting on a knife's edge.

So what was this Doctor here for? Stempfer was dead. The Soviets had the element of surprise. So why send' this Doctor fellow across with word of the missiles at all?

Was he here to negotiate terms? Even they wouldn't be that brazen, surely?

Grainger could feel his jaw going ten to the dozen. If he ground his teeth any more he'd start chipping bits off.

He booted the surgeon, who until that point had been snoring obliviously away to himself on the decrepit old couch. He awoke sharply. 'Good grief, man. What in blazes is the matter with you?'

'Get up.'

The rush of blood was stronger now. All he could hear was its roar. 'Get your kit. We have information to extract.'

The surgeon stumbled groggily to his feet. 'What's the matter with him?'

Grainger didn't care what either of them thought, as Carstairs looked on in fear, and said, 'I have no idea... '

Munro hog-tied him with thick electrical cable, his arms stretched

tightly behind the back of the chair.

The Doctor didn't struggle. It was almost as though he had been expecting it.

'Have you heard of Torquemada?' Grainger asked, trying to sound casual, but everyone in the room knew it was a lie.

The Doctor said nothing at first. He listened instead to the faint sounds of something being prepared in the next room. It sounded very much like a dentist's drill. 'Well...' he replied eventually. 'Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.'

Grainger didn't bother to hide his glee at the proposition. 'As Inquisitor General, Torquemada was a master at getting people to talk, who otherwise would have preferred not to. When he inflicted pain he elevated it to an art form.'

The Doctor knew better. 'Torture doesn't work, Eddie,' he said. 'Instead of getting people to tell you what you want to know, they tell you what you want to hear.'

But even as he said it, the surgeon entered the room with a steady air of the inevitable. He set a tray down on the table and picked up the syringe by the barrel. Tapped it once. Then let a thin jet of clear liquid shoot out to remove the tiny air-bubbles.

'Sodium pentathol,' Grainger explained. 'Truth serum.'

'I had no idea we were going for drinks,' the Doctor quipped. 'Care to join me?'

'If I were you I'd treat this with a little more gravity.'

'Oh, in the words of a future Earth leader, don't mis-underestimate me, Eddie. I never make jokes unless I'm deadly serious.'

'Then maybe you'll find this funny,' Munro interjected, cracking his knuckles, eager to punch the Doctor hard across the face.

The surgeon tossed the syringe down in disgust. He turned his back to leave. ‘I want no part in this.’

‘Oh, I’m with you,’ the Doctor readily agreed.

‘Shut up! ‘ Munro spat, ready to carry out his threat, but Grainger stayed his arm.

‘Check his heartbeat,’ Grainger snapped. ‘He’s not who he says he is. He has two of them.’

‘What are you talking about?’

The Doctor looked on kindly. ‘You’d better do as he says.’

The surgeon stepped to the side of his patient and did as he was ordered, but he remained sceptical. ‘The man was shot, for heaven’s sake. He’s in shock. That could just be arrhythmia.’

‘It’s two hearts!’

‘Get a grip, man, the pair of you.’

With that, the surgeon stormed past Grainger and Munro, and marched off down the hallway.

‘Shatters the illusion,’ said the Doctor, ‘when one of your inquisitors suffers a crisis of conscience, eh?’

Grainger set his chair down in front of the Doctor and slumped in it. ‘You still look like you’ve got something on your mind, though.

How are you coping?’ the Doctor inquired. ‘Still feel all that adrenalin thundering through your ears? Everything still mired in a red mist?’

Grainger tried hard to concentrate, but the rage simply wouldn’t lift. ‘Yes... hard to think, isn’t it? Hard to do anything except obey...

Maybe *you* should have the sodium pentathol?’ the Doctor

remarked with some irony. ‘Clear your head a bit.’

Grainger took a breath. It was like trying to inhale treacle. ‘What are the aims of the Jalaphron?’ he demanded.

‘To wreak havoc. To feed,’ the Doctor said grimly.

Grainger glowered at Munro to finally hit him. But, as the old soldier gleefully stepped forward to comply, a searing pain shot through him, bending him double.

Grainger rounded on the Doctor in panic. Everything was spiralling away so fast. ‘No more games, Doctor. Tell me about the Jalaphron.’

‘What good would it do? You’re not listening.’

‘Tell me!’

‘They’d love it in here,’ the Doctor replied casually. ‘They feed on misery, Eddie. The Jalaphron leave their young on socially unstable worlds. The more turmoil, war and destruction, the greater the feast. But the Cold War has caused a perverse kind of famine, bringing three millennia of non-stop war, three millennia of good harvest to an end. This stalemate has bred fear, but it’s reduced misery.

‘The Jalaphron are starving, Eddie. So they’ve taken matters into their own hands. They’re going to start a war.’

Grainger clawed his forehead, trying desperately to ease his confusion. But it felt as though somebody else’s fingers were already there, digging into his scalp, crushing his skull.

‘What, er... what are you talking about?’

The Doctor pressed his advantage. ‘There are things going on in this world that not everybody is aware of. Creatures from other worlds. Other universes. Other dimensions in time and space. Of course, Ambassador Skgar over there could tell you more. Though between you and me, he’s not really an ambassador. Too young. Never took

the test. He's more of a spokesman, really, aren't you, Skgar. What's that? Oh, yes... well, the same to you.'

Grainger tried to focus on the scuttling insect. It seemed fatter somehow. Like an engorged tic that had been feeding on blood.

'Get rid of that thing.'

Munro did as he was asked, swiping the bug off the table and hurling it to the floor.

'Careful you don't step on the ambassador,' the Doctor advised. 'He's feeling a little fragile.'

'Enough!' Enraged, Grainger got to his feet and crushed it under his heel.

A sickly yellow ooze spilled out from under his shoe. And immediately it felt like a pressing weight had been lifted.

Grainger staggered, his vision clearing, his focus returning. So light-headed was the feeling of sudden clarity that he slumped back into his chair, holding his head in his hands, feeling the gradual onslaught of a really bad hangover.

He glanced across at Munro, whose own dizzy spell had him hugging the wall.

He felt his breath returning. Felt his anxiety subsiding.

When Grainger finally had the courage to look the Doctor in the eye, still tied firmly to the chair, he felt nothing but embarrassment and shame

'Oh, my God,' he said. 'What are we doing?'

The Doctor peered disdainfully down at his shoulder, tugged the piece of suture out of his shoulder and threw it away.

Munro helped him on with his coat. When he handed him his hat

he couldn't help but keep his head bowed and look away. 'I'm... I'm very sorry, sir.'

'As you should be,' the Doctor replied cheerfully, settling it down on his mop of curly brown hair. 'Succumbing to alien mind control. Who's ever heard of such a thing?'

The Doctor couldn't help but watch after him with a rueful smile as the sergeant major skulked off.

'Eddie,' Carstairs announced, looking up from his wireless set. 'Control says three more large ships have been spotted heading for Cuba.'

'And their cargo?'

Carstairs expression was grave. 'More warheads.'

'Why is he allowed to call you Eddie and I'm not?' the Doctor interjected.

Grainger let the comment go, subserviently approaching the Doctor.

'Tell me what we have to do to get this thing to end.'

'I've traced the Jalaphron hive mother and her brood to the sewers beneath Berlin. You need to stay back and mop up what's left behind when I'm done. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly. I've seen what just one of these things can do.'

'Yes, well, once I've dealt with their hive mother, their abilities will drop considerably. What you felt the moment the fog lifted from your mind is going to happen almost instantaneously in the Kremlin, in the White House, and at Number 10. They're going to find themselves on the brink of a war they don't remember starting, and they're going to need time to talk themselves into backing down from it. That's your job, Eddie. I'll have done all I can do.'

Grainger was stunned. 'But how long will that take?' 'Oh, ten or 12

days or so.'

But Grainger remained troubled. 'May I ask... ? Why are you doing this?'

'Because I made a promise to Stempfer.' The Doctor felt around in his coat pocket and pulled out the metallic-looking pen with the light. 'Oh, which reminds me. Have you got a telephone?'

Grainger didn't understand. 'Over in the corner.'

The Doctor strode over, aimed his peculiar little instrument at it, and then picked up the black Bakelite receiver.

'Romana,' he said.

Grainger could just hear the reply on the other end of the line. A woman exclaiming, 'Doctor, you're alive! I've been scouring Moscow but they just keep popping up everywhere.'

'Yes. Not to worry. I've located the hive mother.'

'Where are you?'

'West Berlin. I want you to listen very carefully. When I give the signal I want you to bring the TARDIS and initiate a matter-time divergence.'

He waited for her reply but she said nothing

'No arguing.'

'I wasn't arguing.'

He didn't seem convinced and reached into his pocket. But when he exchanged his glowing pen for the small paper bag, he weighed it in his hand and his expression changed to ashen.

It appeared to Grainger that this Romana was very perceptive indeed because even on the end of the line she knew to be

concerned. ‘Doctor, what’s wrong?’

‘Someone’s stolen a jelly baby.’

The dank sewers of West Berlin stretched for mile upon foul-smelling mile. Grainger followed closely behind the Doctor, careful not to find himself knee-deep in effluent. For a larger man, the Doctor was agile and surprisingly fast. Not at all what Grainger had expected.

‘How do you know where we’re going?’ he asked.

‘It’s not only a human urge to visit your mother,’ the Doctor replied.

At first Grainger didn’t know what on earth he was talking about. But, slowly, as his eyes adjusted to darkness, he realised that the damp brickwork was alive with snakes of scuttling cockroaches all running in the same direction.

Grainger’s heart hit his ribcage with a thump. It made his skin crawl just looking at them. ‘There must be... thousands of them.’

‘Yes, but only one that we need to worry about.’

As they rounded the corner up ahead, the mass of glistening insects converged, crawling over each other to nuzzle at the dripping teats of a vast incandescent yellow lump poking up from under the effluent flowing down the tunnel.

Grainger stared in disbelief. Was that an actual alien life form? ‘Oh, my God,’ he said. ‘Is that really...?’

‘Yes, I think you’re right,’ the Doctor replied, reaching for a handkerchief. ‘I do believe she’s ill.’

The Jalaphron hive mother undulated to the tender affections of her gathering brood. Yet, as her translucent skin oozed with discoloured sweat, Grainger felt a heightened sense of trepidation. A animal was usually at its most dangerous when wounded.

‘You’re sure just this shot of sodium pentathol is going to protect us?’

‘For you, for a little while at least. It interrupts the brain chemistry and makes it a job for them to latch on.’

‘But what about you?’

‘Me?’ There was that grin again. Mischievous, yet chilling. ‘No effect whatsoever. Now you know what you have to do?’

‘Wait for you to go, light this fuse, then toss in the fire bomb. Munro and his men have flamethrower teams standing by at the manholes nearby just in case there’s more of them.’

‘Good man.’ The Doctor reached for his glowing pen again. ‘Well, it’s been good to see you again, Eddie -’

‘Doctor, if I may... I don’t understand. What is it you’re going to do?’

The Doctor seemed more than a little impatient. ‘Do I really have to?’

‘Please... ‘

Reluctantly the Doctor explained. ‘The TARDIS will arrive over there, when I give the signal. At which point, Romana will render the time vortex temporarily unstable. We’ll travel to another destination, dragging the hive mother and most of her brood with us, caught in our wake as we go. Understand?’

‘Not a word of it.’

‘Good.’

With that. the Doctor shot off down the tunnel, pointing his odd little apparatus at the glowing lump in the water.

‘Time you should be leaving, don’t you think, old girl?’

The incandescent mass seemed to moan at his arrival.

The Doctor seemed shocked. ‘Well, there’s no need to be like that,’ he said and, without further hesitation, he pressed the small button on the side of his device.

And there it was! That sound Grainger had heard before. That peculiar scream, like a braying metallic walrus.

And then, from thin air, the appearance of that ordinary blue police box! A second later and the door to the box was flung open and a woman stood in its entrance. ‘Come on, Doctor!’ she yelled.

The Doctor shot a look back. ‘Are you ready for your close-up, Mr DeMille?’

Grainger looked down at the petrol bomb in his hand and got his match ready. ‘You know,’ he called out. ‘You really are a very strange man.’

The Doctor hesitated in the doorway, genuinely touched, and smiled. ‘Thank you, Eddie. That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.’

Grainger’s telephone box stood under a tree on a quiet suburban road in Charlottenburg, the smell of burning petrol still thick in his nostrils.

The line was crackly and faint, but Grainger didn’t care. ‘Hello, dear. How was the canasta?’ he asked warmly.

Any other woman would have taken him to task for calling so late, but not Eleanor. More than anyone, she understood. They chatted idly about friends and card games until eventually she asked him, ‘Darling, did we both win tonight?’

‘Yes,’ Grainger replied. ‘Yes, I think we did.’

‘When are you coming home?’

‘In a couple of weeks. First I have to go to Washington.’

Eleanor put her foot down. ‘But then a holiday.’

‘Yes, let’s. Somewhere warm.’ Grainger said. ‘I want to come out of the cold.’

Short Trips: Time Signature

Perhaps it's because the character is all in Patrick Troughton's brilliant performance - not *what* he says so much as *how* - but I've always found the Second Doctor really difficult to write. I'm very envious of Eddie getting him so perfectly here.

All the individual, standalone stories in Time Signature help tell a bigger story. To make that work, I wrote a rough outline of the bigger story, with a sentence or two of plot stuff for each author to include in their story.

Eddie's brief was: The Second Doctor visits a friend who is, like him, a time traveller and musician. The man is working on a project to mix time and music. But there are people who want to make it into a weapon.'

Eddie sent me his synopsis on 9 March 2006. But I'd heard rumours that an episode of the forthcoming new series of Doctor Who might be doing something similar with televisions. Eddie responded that, from what we could garner from online rumours, 'Gatiss' episode looks like it's nostalgic from a viewer's point of view, so I'll steer towards behind the scenes, the can-do spirit of 1960s TV.'

I love this emphasis in the story. I loved it so much I stole Eddie's time traveller / musician for my own story in the book - which tied up the bigger story. 'Did you have any idea who Flora might be, other than in this story?' I asked Eddie on 6 June.

'I didn't, really,' said Eddie, i was thinking in terms of sixties Who, where these things tended to be left ambiguous, so I didn't even decide whether she was human or not. I think she's not Gallifreyan - she's either from a future era on Earth where they have time travel, or from an advanced civilisation like the People [from some Doctor Who books in the 1990s], and she splits her time between making music and researching temporal anomalies.

'I didn't get a chance to mention this in the story,' he concluded,

‘but her car contains her time-travel equipment, so it can travel in time if the correct 8-track cartridge is inserted into the tape player.’

Simon Guerrier

The Avant Guardian
Eddie Robson

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,
with Jamie McCrimmon and Zoe Heriot

Burgess climbed into his car, placed his briefcase on the passenger seat and tossed his coat onto the back seat without looking. As he did so, his hand brushed against something unfamiliar and metal, and he did a double take.

Lying on the back seat of his car was a tall young man holding a handgun, wearing a thick coat and a balaclava. Burgess could see very little else of him in the unlit car park. It clearly wasn't easy for him to be in that position and he seemed relieved to be able to straighten up. As he did so, the gun remained trained on Burgess, as did the gunman's eyes.

'Howard Burgess?' he asked.

Burgess nodded. 'There's, er, no need to hurt me. I'll give you anything you want.'

The tall man said nothing.

'Er, what do you want?' asked Burgess. 'Money, is it? Or something else?'

'You're head of Programme Planning, right?' said the tall man. He spoke quickly, with little trace ofan accent.

Burgess nodded again.

'Good. A little bird tells me you've just scheduled *Waterfront Beat* for Wednesdays at 8.30.'

'What?' Burgess was starting to wonder if this was a practical joke, but didn't dare say so in case it wasn't.

'Waterfront Beat,' the tall man repeated aggressively. 'Wednesdays. Eight-thirty.'

'That's the new police drama serial?'

'Yes,' the tall man said impatiently.

'Er, yes,' said Burgess. He swallowed hard. 'I have, yes.'

'Right. Well, I was not very happy to hear about that. Not happy at all.'

'Oh?'

'Oh, no. You see, I'd really rather that it went out at 7.30 on Fridays.' He brandished the gun a little towards Burgess. 'I'm very keen that that should be the case.'

'But, er, there are several factors... er, we thought about when placing it in the slot we've chosen, mainly that the slightly more adult content suggested a later slot and... er, we've heard that the other lot are going to run the new series of *The Identikit Man* on Fridays.'

'Yes, we know. That's where I want it - exactly opposite *The Identikit Man.'*

'Why?'

'Don't ask questions. Bring the first episode forward five days.'

'We can't.'

'Can't or won't?'

'Can't. We've already sold the advertising space. The listings have gone to press - it'll be a ratings disaster.'

'Hmm,' said the tall man. 'I don't want that. No... put it back two

days.'

'How can I explain a decision like that?'

'Any way you like, as long as it doesn't mention me or what's happened here tonight. Understood?'

Burgess nodded.

'If it doesn't happen, Burgess, I know where you live.' The tall man released the door catch and Burgess heard his footfalls as he ran from the car park.

Burgess laid his hands on the steering wheel. As he tried to bring his nerves under control, he wondered just when the world of television had become quite so competitive and why he hadn't noticed.

A grinding, abrasive whine rose from Flora's dinner plate; a noise which she created by using her fork to describe a figure of eight around the plate, sweeping aside the remains of her bolognaise as she went.

Dominic, sitting to her left, broke offhis conversation with Bill and politely asked Flora if she would please stop making the noise. He was polite because she was his friend and, technically, his boss.

Flora continued as before.

'Flora?' Dominic said, aware that other diners were turning around to look at them.

'Yes... I heard,' said Flora. 'It's interesting. Why is that an irritating noise, do you think?'

'I don't know, Flo,' said Bill. 'But if you want us to talk about it, you'll have to stop making it 'cause I can't think and hear that at the same time.'

Flora laid her fork on the edge of the plate. 'You see what I mean,

though?' she asked. 'It provokes a reaction, a strong one... and basically the same in everybody.'

'You're not thinking of using it on *Identikit?'* asked Dominic. 'You'll never get it past Bryan. Or any producer, for that matter. I'll bet you five pounds you can't.'

'Hmm,' said Flora. 'What ifyou could impose a musical pitch on it

'What, with the frequency changer?'

'I don't trust that gizmo,' said Bill. 'It rattles like hell and the longer it's left on, the louder it gets. Mark my words, one of these days it's going to blow up and kill somebody. And it's not going to be me.'

'But if you could make a scale out of it,' said Flora, ignoring Bill entirely, 'and put together a melody out of it... that perhaps worked against the "natural" tone?'

Dominic chuckled. 'I dare you to wipe all the flute sounds off the mellotron and put your fork-squeal scale on it instead.'

Flora smiled and dipped her head. 'No. Don't be childish, Dominic.'
'That's better,' said Bill.

'What do you mean?'

'I think,' said Dominic, 'Bill's referring to the fact that you haven't smiled once during dinner. Am I correct, Bill?'

Bill nodded. It had become a weekly tradition among the staff of the Sound Unit to end the week with a meal at Alessandro's and, although Flora had a tendency to be vague in social situations, tonight she seemed more than that: distant and tense.

'Oh?' said Flora. 'Sorry. It's just... I had a run-in with Samantha earlier.'

'From Programme Planning,' said Dominic 'What about?'

‘They repeated *The Order of Seasons* last night, and… well, I asked her to tell me if any of my things would be on.’

‘You mean the *Present-Day Play* from last year?’ said Bill. ‘I didn’t think you did anything for that one?’

‘No, I did. I scored the two film sequences,’ said Flora. ‘It won’t be on again. They didn’t list it. Change to the advertised programme.’

‘Can’t you get the archive to sort you out a screening copy?’

Flora paused. ‘That’s what Samantha told me to do. But… it’s not the same.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Dominic. ‘I always like to see them go out live. It gives you rather a kick to know that everybody out there’s hearing your stuff, doesn’t it?’

Flora cleared her throat. ‘Yes, that’s it.’ ‘Don’t you have something on tonight?’

‘Yes. The start of the new series of *Identikit Man.’*

‘I thought that started already?’ said Bill.

‘No, they put it back a month.’

‘Gawd, they do faff about, don’t they? Why launch a new series three weeks before Christmas?’

Flora sighed. ‘I don’t know. I just hope it rates well.’

‘I bet you do. When it comes to residuals, you can’t beat a theme.

You didn’t write that as a standard contract thing, right?’

‘No, I score the episodes as staff but the theme’s published separately.’

‘Quids in,’ said Bill.

Flora checked her watch. ‘I should go, it’s on at 7.30.’ She stood to leave.

‘Flo?’ said Dominic. ‘Could I get my key back off you?’

‘Key?’

‘Yes. You were swinging it around that Theremin earlier?’

‘Oh… was that yours?’ Flora reached into her pocket, found the key and returned it to him. ‘I thought it was mine.’

It had been a while since the Doctor had howled to be let out, so he did it again. He was aware that there was only a point to this if some conscious force was responsible for his presence here, which was not necessarily the case, but he was unsure what else he could do. He tried to punch against the sides of his prison, only to discover that it didn’t have any.

For a few moments, the Doctor sank into quiet contemplation of his situation. There would be a solution; he would find it and he would release himself.

He quickly became bored of this and threw a tantrum instead, shouting and kicking and flailing his arms around. He succeeded only in punching himself in the face - which should have been physically impossible in this position, so at least this told him something of the nature of the place in which he was trapped. But it offered no clues how to escape.

At 7.31 pm, the title sequence of *The Identikit Man* played across TV screens all over the country, including one belonging to Flora Millrace. The titles concisely retold the story of the Identikit Man, Douglas Hunter, across a series of clips from the first episode: how he had come home one day following a business trip to discover that his wife was married to someone else and did not remember him. His entire identity had vanished, there was no record of him anywhere, and he no longer needed to eat or sleep. He now moved through the world like a ghost, trying to fathom what had

happened to him and helping people along the way. This montage was accompanied by a sinister, rather chilly drone-based composition of Flora's, performed largely on an Ondes Martenot but with an otherworldly buzz behind it (Flora had achieved this by taking white noise and playing it backwards, and then overlaying it on the same white noise playing forwards).

For forty seconds, this familiar piece tumbled from the tiny speakers of 7,603,974 television sets. The sound waves rebounded inside living rooms and spilled out into the streets: no longer audible to human ears, they nevertheless clashed against each other.

From her own home in Acton, Flora stared at the display of a computer that she never showed to anybody because they would never recognise it for what it was. It monitored the patterns of clashing sound waves over London and much of the surrounding area. As her music flowed through the matter of the city, it prised open very tiny temporal rifts, punching minuscule holes between the material world and the space-time vortex. These did no real damage whatsoever, but merely tested the integrity of the bond between the chronological universe and its 'back door'. The tune which millions of viewers associated with a handsome stranger's attempts to resolve his existential crisis - and to solve odd mysteries along the way - had, in fact, been painstakingly designed by Flora many years previously in another time and place, its rhythms and collisions calculated with great precision to produce precisely this effect. This was the reason for its curious changes of pace - which could thankfully be artistically justified as a reflection of the uncertainty which underpinned the tone of the series (or did when it was written by people who actually understood it, rather than the occasional hacks who just treated it like a straightforward detective drama).

When the forty seconds were over, Flora's computer showed her its results. Her systems had followed the music as it went about its work. Most of the map was coloured blue, which indicated areas that were normal and stable. However, the map was flecked with a few dozen spots of red, each of which was an indication of an area where time appeared to be out of phase with everything around it, stuck in an intermediate state between the universe and the vortex.

On the television set in the corner of her room, an action sequence began as Hunter was attacked by a mysterious assailant - for which Flora had also composed the music. This piece was less effective than the title theme, partly because it was brand new and Flora had not been able to test and refine it - it irked her deeply when she was criticised for re- using motifs from her previous work, as she couldn't explain to anybody why this was not just laziness on her part - and partly because she had been required to tailor it to the on-screen events, which limited her use of rhythm. However, for the purposes of fine-tuning her search, it would serve perfectly well.

Every time *The Identikit Man* was broadcast, Flora did this. Then she would pinpoint two or three 'trouble' spots, load her equipment into the back of her Volkswagen Beetle, and try to track them down. When she found them, she would use her equipment to bring these aberrations back into phase: for a few hours after her music had been broadcast, they would be malleable and could be 're-tuned' to the material world around them. This activity would often keep her out past midnight, depending on how far afield she had to travel, so she was rather glad that this series of *The Identikit Man* was going out on Fridays, rather than the previous Tuesday slot. With the show only being broadcast 13 weeks at a time, however, opportunities during the rest of the year were sporadic - and, try as she might, she couldn't come up with anything as effective as what had become the *Identikit Man* theme. There would have been a build-up in activity in the meantime - hence her irritation at not being able to take advantage of last night's broadcast of *The Order of Seasons,* which would probably have allowed her to attend to a couple of spots ahead of this evening.

Fifty minutes later, Douglas Hunter had located the amnesiac boy and returned him to his mother, an attractive widow named Diana - she was set to be a new regular character this series, since the previous love interest had been killed in the last episode of series two (accompanied by some funereal *musique concrete* which had apparently attracted a few complaints, mainly from people with dogs). Flora had been asked to write a little motif for Diana, and had wanted it to be an effective piece since it would be repeated in most of the episodes, but it didn't seem to work as well as she'd hoped. She thought she might try a subtle rewrite; probably no one

would notice.

The end credits rolled, along with the theme music. This allowed Flora to finalise which spots she was heading for. She marked them in pencil on her A-Z, packed her bag and switched off her television set.

Flora knocked on the door of 27 Brentwood Road, Chalk Farm, at 9.37pm. The door was answered by a stocky man who had no idea why she was there, and said so when she introduced herselfand asked ifshe might see inside.

'Have you...' Flora leaned back and peered through their bay window. 'Do you ever get headaches when you stand up in your front room? And when you walk out of the room, they go away again?'

The stocky man blinked.

'Would you like me to try and... er, eliminate that for you?' said Flora. 'It must be terribly annoying.'

The stocky man turned and looked inside his house, then turned back to Flora and invited her in. He was clearly suspicious, but she was willowy, soft-voiced and gentle of movement, so he must have been confident of warding off any potential threat she might pose.

The stocky man's stocky wife and one of his two stocky children sat on the living room sofa, whilst the other child lay on his front on the floor: the armchair was evidently earmarked for father. Flora greeted them and placed her bag - a doctor's bag - on the floor. The family was watching *The Correctors* on the other side, or rather they had been: now, they were discussing the sudden presence in their home of a well-spoken, dark-haired youngish woman, wearing a pea-green coat over a cashmere sweater and grey wool skirt. Mother was alarmed at having her viewing interrupted, and suspected her husband of some form of stupidity and/or deceit.

Flora politely asked the youngest child to move from the centre of the floor. She produced three conical devices from her bag and

positioned them around the floor, then plugged them into a very stripped-down version of her home computer - quite apart from being lighter, it had a more rudimentary appearance that tended not to scare people. She looked at the read-out and was pleased.

‘This doesn’t look overly complicated,’ she said. She didn’t like lying; she felt that it was obvious when she did, that her voice became hesitant and quivery. (Her friends never noticed the difference.) However, she had to tell them something. ‘It’s electromagnetic disturbance causing your headaches,’ she said. ‘I detected it from outside... a faulty valve in your television, causing it to leak out.’ She made a mental note to pretend to repair the television later.

Flora operated the device and the three cones sprang to life. Three beams of light projected into the centre of the room and illuminated a sphere in the air, more than a metre in diameter.

‘Wow,’ said the child on the sofa.

The parents said nothing.

For a few minutes, Flora sat fine-tuning her equipment: she adjusted, she listened, she adjusted again. Eventually, the sphere disappeared with a satisfying *zing,* signifying that it had come back into phase with everything around it, and the cones automatically deactivated themselves. This was what always happened.

At the same moment, a small man with short dark hair, a heavily jowled face and a scruffy, baggy suit appeared in the air where the sphere had been and fell to the floor with a heavy impact. He howled in surprise, then again in pain. This was more unusual.

Flora shuffled along the floor on her knees, placed a hand on the man’s shoulder and gently turned him towards her.

Flora smiled. For some reason, she had thought it might be him.

‘Doctor?’ she asked.

The Doctor opened his eyes. ‘Oh.’ He looked around him at the pallid decor of the suburban living room in which he found himself, the resolutely average family and the black-and-white television. Then he looked at his rescuer, and recognition flickered through his eyes. ‘Oh, I say.’ He clasped his hands together and smiled broadly. ‘Well done. Very well done.’

Ten minutes later Flora and her friend were gone, and the family never spoke of them again.

‘Flora?’ said the Doctor, as they drove towards Regent’s Park. He was rummaging, uninvited, through the glove compartment. It had started to rain quite heavily, and they had to speak up over the noise.

‘What’s the matter?’ Flora asked. ‘Don’t you like it?’

‘No, no, it’s nice. It’ll just take some getting used to, that’s all.’

‘I could go by my old name, but I didn’t want to be conspicuous.

Then again, the way things have been going in the past couple of years, I’m starting to think I could get away with it. If anybody asked where it came from, I could tell them it was given to me by aliens - nobody would bat an eyelid.’

‘It’s lovely to see you,’ said the Doctor, unfolding a map of the Pyrenees he’d found in the glove compartment, ‘but I must say, I hadn’t expected to find you in 1968.’

‘I hadn’t expected to find you here either.’

‘Me?’ said the Doctor from behind the map. ‘I’m here all the time. Ask anybody.’

‘Literally all the time?’

‘Well, very frequently.’

‘It’s literally true for me. I’ve been here continuously and

chronologically for four years now.'

The Doctor folded the top of the map over and stared at her in surprise. 'Really?'

Flora nodded.

'Oh, my word,' said the Doctor. 'I don't know how you can bear it. I like it on Earth, but it'd drive me up the wall to stay here for so long. Or anywhere. So what brings you here? Are you still making music?'

'Yes. Initially, that was why I came... there were some things I wanted to see here and now. But I've stayed longer than planned. There's important work to do.'

'Oh?' The Doctor let the map fall against the dashboard.

'Yes. This area has a large amount of... temporal disturbance. Dangerously large. Like that bubble you were in - lots of little bits, out of phase with everything else. Did you say you were here a lot?'

The Doctor bit his thumbnail and looked out of the car window. 'Quite a lot, yes.'

'In this specific area? London and around?'

'Generally,' the Doctor muttered.

'You haven't done anything that might account for the disturbance, have you?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'No, no... well, possibly. But all for a greater good, you understand.'

Flora giggled. 'Oh, I'm sure. You're still crusading around the place, then?'

'Certainly am,' said the Doctor proudly.

‘And still leaving others to clear up after you.’

‘Well,’ the Doctor said, trying vainly to fold the map the way that it was folded originally, ‘I’m not very good at that part of it, you see. If I leave it to other people, they do a better job.’

‘Hmm. Anyway, when I first arrived I spotted the disturbance straight away. I traced it back and it all seemed to start about... about five years ago. I think.’

‘Yes,’ murmured the Doctor, ‘that would make sense.’

‘At first I thought it’d be a simple case of finding each one and clearing it, but it hasn’t been that easy. It fluctuates. They come and go, and when you’ve eliminated one, you find another you didn’t see. I think I’m winning, though... on balance.’

‘Must be a slow process, though,’ said the Doctor. ‘Those kinds of disturbance are notoriously tricky to find.’

Flora suppressed a self-satisfied smile as she explained her technique: the music she had composed, and how she had discovered that television could do much of the work for her. Millions of tiny speakers sending out her tunes in unison, probing the fabric of the world around them, every week.

‘But that’s brilliant!’ said the Doctor.

Flora smiled.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I know you know it’s brilliant.’

Half an hour or so later, the rain had stopped and Flora and the Doctor strode out across Regent’s Park. Flora carried her bag. The Doctor had happened upon an abandoned football and kicked it ahead of him as he walked, flicking up water from the grass. Each contact with his foot echoed back at them from the trees. Flora was very aware of feeling more conspicuous than usual, but the Doctor was good at making you feel safe.

‘How did you end up inside that bubble, anyway?’ she asked. She had assumed that he would volunteer this information, but he hadn’t so far.

‘Ahem,’ said the Doctor. ‘I was, er, working on some modifications to the TARDIS, and I disabled something I shouldn’t have, I think.’

‘Oh, I see. You were meddling.’

‘Essential meddling,’ he said, clearly embarrassed. ‘The TARDIS tried to make an emergency landing and safely eject us -’

‘Us?’

‘My friends, Jamie and Zoe.’

‘Oh, I’ve met Jamie. Don’t know Zoe.’

‘Hopefully you’ll get to meet her. I assume that the same thing’s happened to them as happened to me, trapped in those little bubbles. The TARDIS too. How easy d’you think - whoops!’ He had just mis- kicked his football and it was bobbling away from him. He dashed over, collected it again and returned to Flora’s side. ‘How easy do you think it’d be to find them?’

‘Hmm... During a broadcast we might be able to look at fluctuations which might... er, indicate that there’d be something inside. If we knew what we were looking for.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘But we’d have to wait for the next broadcast.’

‘Which would be when?’

‘I’ll check the listings, but I don’t have anything until this time next week, I think.’

‘Right. I think they’ll be all right until then. Time seems to move much more slowly inside the bubbles. Hard to tell but I think I was

in that one for... Where have you gone?'

The Doctor turned around. Flora had stopped walking and put her bag down on the grass.

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'Are we here already?'

'Yes,' said Flora, without looking up. She was busy placing her cones.

The Doctor nudged his football back along the ground in the other direction. 'So,' he said, 'you just set those up, turn it on, and it all snaps back into phase?' He flipped the ball up and started to play keepy-up.

'It's a little more complicated than -'

The Doctor lost control of the ball and it bounced away from him, knocking over two of the cones as it went. 'Sorry,' he said.

Flora repositioned the cones, picked up the ball and refused to give it back to him, in spite of his protests. Eventually he settled for watching what she was doing: it was, after all, rather interesting.

'Do you think the TARDIS or Jamie or Zoe might be in this one?' he asked.

'Possibly,' she said. 'It's quite a large one.'

Flora switched on her equipment and a sphere appeared in the air between them. The Doctor crossed all his fingers, and put his thumbs together and crossed those too. Flora made her adjustments. The Doctor fidgeted. A couple of minutes later, the sphere *zinged* out of existence.

There was nothing inside.

'Oh,' said the Doctor.

'Well,' said Flora, it was rather a long shot, you realise.'

‘Yes, I know. But I’ve always been lucky.’

With two more bubbles brought back into phase, and nothing else found, the Doctor and Flora returned to her flat a little before two o’clock. Flora realised that she had left her copies of the week’s listings at work, and the next morning left the Doctor to occupy himself with her instruments whilst she returned to the Sound Unit to collect them.

She heard Bill’s voice as she entered their bunker-like building. It wasn’t altogether unusual to find him or Dominic here at the weekend. It was a good chance to work without being disturbed. For this reason, Flora was surprised to hear another voice, one she recognised but not Dominic’s. It was Arthur, a young editor who was working on *The Identikit Man* this year. He was tall, curly haired and habitually wore quite horrible shirts: a little awkward, but very talented from what she’d seen. He was leaning against a console: when he saw her come in, he broke off his conversation with Bill and stood up.

‘Hello,’ he said quickly. ‘Bill said they weren’t expecting you in today.’

‘We weren’t,’ said Bill. ‘Flo’s usually living it up at the weekend, eh?’

‘I left something here,’ said Flora. ‘What brings you in on a Saturday?’ ‘I was hoping to get some work done ahead of time,’ said Arthur. ‘I dropped over to pick up any finished tracks you’ve got for the next few eps.’

‘Oh,’ said Flora. ‘I’m afraid I’m not the best at labelling things... you’ve no hope of working out which is the final version of anything.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I told him,’ said Bill. ‘Lucky you called in.’ ‘What do you need?’ asked Flora.

‘Whatever you’ve got,’ said Arthur.

* * *

The listings revealed that the Doctor's luck was in: a miniseries for which Flora had composed the music, *Cold Starlight,* was being repeated on the second channel this coming Thursday. Upon returning home, Flora warned the Doctor that this would mean fewer viewers than *The Identikit Man,* but because it had all been done on film she'd been able to take more time over the soundtrack and snuck in bits of ambient score through much of the action without intruding on it, so it was a particularly effective piece.

'What's it about?' asked the Doctor as he flicked through the listings.

'Um...' said Flora. 'These people on a spaceship...'

'And what happens to them?'

Flora paused. 'I can't remember. It was very good, though.' She picked up her copy of the listings for the other side, to see what would be on against her programmes It was a current affairs show opposite *Cold Starlight,* which would be fine - but *The Identikit Man* was on opposite a new cop show called *Waterfront Beat,* which seemed to be getting a lot of publicity: it was on the cover of the magazine. This worried her slightly, but she didn't share her concerns with the Doctor.

On Monday afternoon, a tall man entered an editing suite near Waterloo and closed the door quietly behind himself. There was only one person in the room, an almost equally tall young woman with bobbed blonde hair, a rather large nose and very dark eyes, wearing a sweater and long skirt. She went by the name of Turis: she claimed it was Eastern European, and nobody questioned it.

'You took your time,' Turis said to the tall man, whose name was Arto - although whilst in this time and place he was using the name Arthur, which was nicely inconspicuous.

'It takes a while for them to process that kind of thing,' said Arto.

He put a briefcase down on Turis's desk, opened it and produced a film canister.

'What's this?' asked Turis.

'Identikit Man episode two.'

'A telerecording?' she said, appalled. 'How am I supposed to work with that?'

'They don't copy to videotape.'

'Why didn't you copy it yourself?'

'I couldn't get near it. I did try, but it's a TX master. They're not going to let it go walkies.'

'You talked Burgess into moving our show opposite theirs.'

'With a gun, yeah.'

'Why didn't you try the same with them?'

'That was here. They know me there. I can't go waving guns in their faces.'

Turis considered the manner in which her colleague had said this. 'You like it there, don't you?'

'Maybe,' said Arto.

'This isn't the time to turn soft.'

'I know. Don't stress out about it.'

'Don't you find it stressful, working with all this ancient technology?'

'No, not really,' said Arto. 'I kind of like it. Oh, I got masters of a load more of her music too.'

‘Really? Anything we can use?’

‘I think there is, yeah.’

The Doctor filled the time until Thursday by going to the Warhol show in town and visiting James Watson, an old friend of his, and getting him to sign a copy of his latest book for Zoe. In the evenings, he listened to some of Flora’s work and they would discuss it until late at night. They also made some recordings together, most of which were unfinished, but Flora intended to arrange the material into something usable at some stage - maybe not as something for television, but an album of her own. She was particularly pleased with some tape loops that she had made from the sound of the Doctor playing his recorder, and the Doctor let her keep the instrument so that she could replicate the sound if she needed to.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked him. At some point he’d decorated it with stick-on moons and stars, some of which had bent where he’d carried the recorder in his pocket.

‘Oh, quite sure,’ the Doctor said. ‘It isn’t my only one. I’ve got others. Do you really only use contemporary instruments and contemporary technology?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Flora said. ‘I think it would be cheating otherwise. It would be very, very easy to make something nobody had ever heard before... but then I’d feel bad for whoever should have come along and come up with that sound themselves.’

On Tuesday and Wednesday, whilst Flora was at work, the Doctor attended the Rolling Stones’ Rock and Roll Circus and returned full of enthusiasm for Taj Mahal. Flora played him some Cajun-influenced music she’d used on a children’s drama called *The Devil in the Mouse- Hole,* which was partly inspired by Mahal, and the Doctor was fascinated. He commented that the discordant elements might be rather scary for children, and when Flora looked a little put out, the Doctor explained that he hadn’t meant it as a criticism.

On Thursday, the Doctor settled down in Flora's armchair to watch *Cold Starlight.* Flora sat at the back of the living room, monitoring her equipment as the theme music - a building, ambitious piece encompassing all the major chords - was heard around the country. The music rose in tandem with the image of the Starship *Promise* - a model shot which had had special effort put into it as it would be seen every week in the title sequence, and was unusually sophisticated. The Doctor commented on this, but Flora was too busy concentrating..

Flora's soundtrack was, as she had said, almost ever-present. The story was about members of the *Promise* crew being possessed by an alien intelligence, and she had taken advantage of this to make her music akin to another, unseen character, menacing the crew in the background. Although the viewership was probably only something like three million nationally, the constant bombardment of sound waves meant that Flora was able to map the pattern of disturbances quite consistently. After an hour, she had a very good idea of which bubbles might contain the Doctor's ship and his friends.

On the screen, astronaut Jane Hunter was on a space walk, reporting back to her colleagues on what she could see. She tailed off, then screamed... then the radio went dead.

The credits rolled and the theme music played.

'No!' cried the Doctor. He turned to Flora. 'They can't end it there. What happens next?'

'Shh,' said Flora, who was using the theme music to make some final adjustments.

'Aww,' said the Doctor sulkily. He massaged his left index finger: he had been toying with a piece of string during the programme and as it had become increasingly tense, the Doctor had absently wound the string tightly around his finger, creating a series of painful ridges and dents.

Flora stood up. 'So, are we going?'

‘Where?’

‘To find your friends and your TARDIS.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said the Doctor, apparently having quite forgotten.

Their first target was near Hammersmith Pier - a few feet away from the end, hovering about twenty feet above the river. The Doctor and Flora had to hold the cones and point them downwards, towards the bubble. Flora made her adjustments. The Doctor was unsure whether or not to hope that there was something in there: whatever or whoever it was, they were in for a dunking.

The bubble *zinged.* The TARDIS appeared. There was a loud splash. The Doctor tutted. ‘How am I supposed to get *that* out?’

Quite unexpectedly, the TARDIS made its dematerialisation noise and vanished. Before the Doctor could complain about this, it reappeared on the shore, upright and bone dry.

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor.

‘What was that?’ asked Flora.

‘Hostile Action Displacement System. Makes the TARDIS do a short hop if it lands in trouble. That’s what I was trying to fix earlier.’ He straightened his bow tie. ‘I knew I knew what I was doing.’

Once the Doctor had checked that his ship was undamaged, they left the TARDIS on the shore where it was relatively inconspicuous, and went in search of more bubbles. The second of the night was disappointingly empty, but the third, in a back alley in Bloomsbury, contained Zoe. The Doctor stood beneath the bubble and managed to catch her when she fell: it looked to Flora like a well-rehearsed circus act.

Zoe introduced herself to Flora. She was young, small, pretty, round- faced, dark-haired and dressed in a silver catsuit. Flora was surprised: the way that the Doctor had described her, she had been expecting somebody older. The Doctor found a chip shop that was

still open and bought Zoe a fish supper, which she was slightly suspicious of but hungry enough to eat whilst sitting on the back seat of Flora's car. According to Flora, the bubbles would no longer be malleable enough to bring back into phase, and they should try to find Jamie tomorrow.

'How long were you in there?' the Doctor asked as they drove back to Flora's flat. 'A-ha!' he added as he leaned over the back of the seat and stole a chip from Zoe. She slapped his hand away, but failed to prevent the theft.

'Ages,' she complained. 'Twelve hours, at least.'

'I told you,' the Doctor said to Flora. 'Time moves more slowly inside. I was probably in that one for months.' He turned back to Zoe. 'Flora let me out six days ago.'

'You were trapped in one too?' asked Zoe. 'So where's the TARDIS?'

'Hammersmith,' said the Doctor.

The following evening, *The Identikit Man* was going to start late as a consequence of an overrunning live report about Apollo 8 in the previous programme, *Eye on the Future.* Once this became apparent, Arto slipped inside the control room at another channel and demanded that they delay the start of *Waterfront Beat.*

'Why?' asked one of the bemused operators, before noticing that Arto had a gun. At this point the question became, 'How?'

'There's a temporary fault,' said Arto. 'Yeah?'

His instructions were carried out: the 'temporary fault' caption appeared on the monitors in front of them, and on the screens of 5,332,875 viewers across the country.

Not, however, at the home of Flora Millrace, where the Doctor and Zoe were seated on the sofa, animatedly discussing the Apollo 8 item on *Eye on the Future* over cups of tea. Flora sat at the table with her computer, making unnecessary adjustments to pass the time.

Late running irritated her.

‘Good,’ said Arto. ‘Be ready to go straight into the programme when I give you the word. No station ident, no continuity announcement - go straight in. Understand? Is there a set in here that’ll pick up the other channels?’

An operator directed the tall man towards one of the screens. He re-tuned it to a different station, turned the volume up and watched intently. A few minutes passed: *Eye on the Future* ended, there was a trail for the current affairs programme *State of the Age,* and then the station ident appeared.

‘It’s just after 25 to eight,’ said a voice from the set.

‘Be ready,’ Arto said.

‘And now, a little later than billed, it’s another adventure for *The* Identikit Man.’

‘Run it,’ said the tall man. ‘Now.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor as the opening titles ran and he heard the theme music. He turned to Flora and jabbed his finger in the direction of the television. ‘I know this one. This is one of your best ones, I think.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Flora. ‘But it’s certainly my most effective. I’ve used -’ Flora suddenly went quiet.

The Doctor turned. ‘What?’

‘I don’t understand...’ Flora said, staring hard at her monitor.

The Doctor jumped up from the sofa and scurried to her side. Zoe followed. ‘What is it?’ the Doctor asked.

Flora pointed at the screen. look - these are the problem areas, the bubbles. Normally they show up as red. But they’re coming up black.’ ‘What does that mean?’ asked Zoe.

‘I think the bond with the vortex has completely broken down,’ said Flora. ‘It’s like my process has been completely exaggerated. It normally punches little holes between our universe and the vortex - that’s how I find the out-of-phase spots. But it’s as if something has targeted the problem areas and opened them up to the vortex for a few seconds.’

The Doctor’s face fell. ‘You mean that energy has seeped out from the vortex and into each of those bubbles?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Flora.

‘But if it gets out... that could be disastrous!’ said the Doctor. ‘It could cause untold damage!’

‘I don’t understand what’s causing it. The technique... it seems like mine, but nothing I’ve done could do this... ‘

The Doctor straightened up and looked at the television, drumming his fingers on his mouth. The standard early action sequence of *The Identikit Man* had just begun, accompanied by a version of Flora’s standard action music. The Doctor ran over to the TV and returned it to the other side, where *Waterfront Beat* was airing. It was a straightforward dialogue scene, a policeman interviewing a suspect, but had been scored with jarring, staccato music. It didn’t match the action at all, and obscured the dialogue at times. The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. He switched back to *The Identikit Man,* then went from one to the other, over and over. He didn’t have to explain to Flora what he was getting at: the two pieces shared a rhythm. The *Waterfront Beat* music was a counterpoint to hers. They weren’t precisely synchronised, but that didn’t matter: they’d still be out there, colliding against each other, the new piece changing the effect of her own.

‘Who’s doing this?’ Flora asked.

‘Hopefully,’ said the Doctor, pulling his shoes on, ‘we’ll find that out during the process of stopping them.’

The door of the control room opened and Turis entered, carrying a bag and directing a round of applause at Arto. ‘Bravo,’ she said.

‘It’s working then, is it?’ asked Arto.

‘Yep.’ She opened her bag, pulled out a reel of videotape and handed it to one of the vision controllers. ‘I think it’s time for this one,’ she said. ‘Cue it up.’

The controller did as he was told.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Flora as they all climbed into the car.

‘Hammersmith,’ the Doctor said.

‘The TARDIS?’ asked Zoe.

‘Yes. I’ve got an idea that might work - hopefully there’s enough time for it. I wish we could keep monitoring the television from in here.’

‘Pull down the glove compartment,’ said Flora.

The Doctor did so and a small monitor sprang forward from it.

‘I’m fairly sure this contravenes the Highway Code, you know,’ the Doctor said, reaching around the back and turning it on.

After a couple of minutes of *Waterfront Beat,* still with inappropriate music, the picture was abruptly interrupted by an image of a man and a woman. Flora glanced at it, then glanced again. ‘That’s Arthur,’ she said.

‘Who?’ asked the Doctor.

‘He’s an editor. He works on *The Identikit Man.* I saw him the other day.’

‘Shh,’ said Zoe to them both. ‘They’re talking.’

'... mainly a message for your leaders,' the woman was saying, 'although in the interests of transparency, we thought you should all hear it. We've planted bombs in dozens of locations around London. Very powerful ones.'

'Don't bother trying to look for them,' said Arthur. 'You won't find them.'

'We'd like to make a deal with you to make free use of your energy sources,' the woman continued, 'but we're afraid we can't offer anything in return, hence the bombs. We'll be expecting to hear from your leaders within two hours. Otherwise, there'll be a lot more of this.'

A piece of music began to play, a jaunty little melody played on an acoustic guitar: it sounded like something from a children's programme However, the signal then died very rapidly. Thirty seconds or so later, *Waterfront Beat* returned - then, outside the car, they heard a distant explosion. It reminded Zoe slightly of the TARDIS, but it was a much harsher sound, an abrupt and painful wrench.

The Doctor turned to Flora, grim-faced. Flora kept her eyes on the road.

'Jamie's in one of those,' said Zoe.

'I know,' said the Doctor. 'I'm sure he'll be all right while the energy's still contained, but...' He turned to Flora. 'What was that piece of music at the end? Do you know it?'

'I practically wrote it,' said Flora. 'It was a lot like a piece that was on the masters I gave to Arthur the other day. I've been... experimenting for a while with a piece to bring the bubbles into phase automatically, but I've never managed to... Wait a minute, they've managed to make it work, haven't they?' She sounded quite affronted.

'Offended your professional pride, has it?' asked the Doctor.

‘A little bit, yes. But only one of the bubbles exploded.’

‘They probably reduced the transmitter range to the absolute minimum,’ said Zoe, ‘so the music only went out in a small radius. It was probably a bubble near the transmitter that went up.’

The Doctor pulled a notebook and pencil from his pocket, and started drawing what looked like a rough circuit diagram. ‘Flora,’ he said without looking up, ‘do you think you could copy what they did to your music?’

Flora hesitated. ‘I’m not sure. Hard to tell from the first few seconds, but I think... I could try to work out how it should go. Why?’

‘I think the best way to stop them playing that music is to play it before they do.’

‘Have you got a guitar?’

‘Oh? Acoustic or electric?’

‘How much damage did the first explosion do?’ asked Turis.

‘A lot, but within a very small radius,’ said Arto, consulting the read-out from a small computer. ‘At a rough estimate, fifty dead, perhaps sixty, and substantial collateral damage.’ He looked up. ‘I hope they don’t make us destroy any more.’

‘I told you. Don’t turn soft.’

‘I’m just saying I’d rather we got what we want. Then everybody’s happy, aren’t they?’

Zoe wrapped the cable around one of the pier’s supports six times, then she looked back to see if there was enough slack in it for another couple of coils. This was the kind of job Jamie usually got stuck with. She wondered if he understood what was happening, trapped in his bubble, surrounded by dormant vortex energy. Probably not. He was probably thinking about how hungry he was.

Unless he'd been in the one that had already exploded, of course.

Zoe tugged on the cable - which ran from the bridge, across the shore and inside the TARDIS - and a little more slack emerged. She unwrapped and then rewrapped the cable, then she used the Doctor's sonic screwdriver to weld the end tight and walked back to the TARDIS.

Upon stepping inside the ship, Zoe saw that the Doctor had connected the cable to the console. He had prised open a couple of panels and patched in other pieces of equipment, including a microphone. Two more cables sprang from opposite sides of the console and went in the direction of the power room. He continued to work at his improvised arrangement, testing connections and tapping his screwdriver on things. Zoe asked what he was doing, partly because she wanted to know, partly because she wanted to check his work for mistakes.

'Well, the TARDIS has its own transmitter and receiver,' the Doctor said. 'Right now we want to use them for completely different purposes, so I've separated them out. We're going to boost the power to the transmitter - I've linked it direct to the power room - and swamp the television frequency, and broadcast the "phasing" tune ourselves.'

'But how are you going to stop the energy destroying everything?'

'Well, just like electricity always tries to find the quickest route to the ground, vortex energy tries to find the quickest route back to the vortex. It's leaked into the universe but our friends there have closed that route off, so it'll try to punch its way back through. On the way, it destroys any matter in its way.'

'So we offer it a quicker way?'

The Doctor clapped his hands together. 'Exactly! The TARDIS draws its energy from the vortex - it's not hard to let it go back the other way. The receiver's tuned to pick it up, the pier acts as a giant aerial, and it all goes down our other cable to the power room.' He

pointed towards the interior door.

Just then, Flora stepped through the interior door into the console room, with an acoustic guitar hanging from her shoulder.

‘How did you get on?’ asked the Doctor.

‘I can do the part I heard and I can remember the version they stole, and assuming they’ve been consistent about how they’ve changed it... well, there are a few possible versions.’

‘How different is it?’ asked Zoe.

‘Not so different that I couldn’t sue them for breach of copyright.’ ‘Ready then?’ asked the Doctor, picking up the microphone and pointing it towards her.

Flora nodded, and the Doctor switched on.

Across the London area, thousands of screens went black. A couple of seconds later, a few hesitant chords could be heard being played on an acoustic guitar: then a bright tune emerged, one that was fairly familiar to anybody who had been listening earlier. It was very familiar indeed to Turis and Arto, still standing in the control room and now looking desperately at each other, each hoping for the other to explain what was happening.

The tune came to an end. Nothing happened.

‘I can’t have got it right,’ said a female voice from the television. ‘That’s all right, try it another way,’ said a male voice.

‘That’s her,’ said Arto.

‘From the Sound Unit?’ asked Turis. ‘The woman who makes the music?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s she doing?’

‘I don’t understand. Doesn’t she know what’ll happen?’

‘Maybe not.’

‘What do we do?’ Arto stepped closer to Turis. ‘What do we do?’

The tune began again.

At the end of Flora’s second attempt, there was a vast, unified *zing* over London. For a millisecond, malevolent globes of vortex energy hung over the city, waiting to be drawn home via the quickest possible route. Then, as one, they zoomed towards Hammersmith.

Anybody watching the pier would have seen it glow deep purple as the energy coursed through it and down the cable. Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor instructed Zoe and Flora to stand well back. He hadn’t divulged his concern that the energy might do considerable damage to the console: it was designed to handle surges, but nothing as big as this. The energy fed through in a matter of moments, but to the Doctor it felt a great deal longer: when it was gone, he immediately hurried to the console and tested its vital functions. When they were sure that everything was okay, Zoe and Flora wasted no time in gently mocking him for his tender concern over his ship.

And, in a Kensington garden belonging to two young socialites named Astrid and Iris Vaughn-Jones, a young Scotsman fell from the air and into the laurel bushes.

Arto and Turis, both braced for the sound of mass destruction, realised at about the same time that it wasn’t going to come. They opened their eyes, looked at each other, and both scrambled for the computer. Turis got there first, examined the screen and wearily handed it to Arto. ‘Our bargaining chip has gone.’

‘What do we do now?’ asked Arto.

Turis sighed. ‘Leave.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said a voice behind them they both recognised. They turned. ‘I didn’t think you’d find us so -’ began Arto. But he stopped when he saw the grey man in the grey morning dress, a gleaming white flower in his buttonhole.

‘Who are you?’ said Turis as the grey man came forward. Faster than should have been possible, he stabbed her just above the heart with one fingertip.

She flopped forward dead, into his arms.

It took the Doctor and Zoe four days to find Jamie, and he was surprised to discover that they had believed he might be dead. Oh, no, he told them, he’d had a marvellous time. Once Jamie had convinced Astrid and Iris that he wasn’t dangerous, they had looked after him very well indeed. Reluctantly he bade them farewell and accompanied them to the car, where he was delighted to see Flora, whom he had always got on well with. As she drove them back to Hammersmith, the Doctor and Zoe explained to him what had been happening whilst he’d been trapped.

‘So, what happened to the people you saw on the tellything” Jamie asked.

‘The people behind it all?’ said the Doctor. He was writing in his 500-year diary. ‘Don’t know.’

‘We worked out where they must have been broadcasting from,’ said Zoe, ‘but they were long gone by the time we got there.’

‘They must have got away,’ said Flora. ‘Which is a nuisance.’

‘So, we’ve no idea where they came from. They can’t have been from this time and place; they understood the principles behind Flora’s music. It’s going to annoy me until I find out, you know.’

‘What did they want?’ asked Jamie.

‘Energy,’ said Zoe.

‘Presumably to fuel more time experiments,’ said the Doctor, chewing on his pencil. ‘You need rather more than a nine-volt battery to manipulate the time stream. I should keep an eye out for them in the future. And the past.’ He turned to Flora. ‘So, what will you do now we’ve fixed all those holes?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I suppose I could move on. But I like what I’m doing here. Maybe I’ll take some time off first. I think... yes, I think I’ve earned it.’

As the Doctor, Jamie and Zoe trooped into the TARDIS, Flora opened her bag. This time it did not contain her phase-control equipment, but a reel-to-reel tape recorder. She untangled a microphone, started the recorder running and stepped over to the Doctor’s craft.

As it disappeared from view it made that noise, the noise she’d heard so many times and always meant to record, and Flora smiled to herself. It hung in the air for several seconds when no blue was visible any more, and she kept the recorder running until long after she could no longer hear it - because even if she couldn’t hear it, that didn’t mean it wasn’t still there.

Eventually she turned the tape recorder off. Yes, she could definitely use that on something.

Short Trips: Dalek Empire

The Dalek Empire Short Trips collection was one of the many things in Big Finish history that demonstrate how much I wasn't thinking I'd ever end up in charge of the Doctor Who audio range. Keen to expand the Dalek Empire strand, I'd already managed to get everyone to agree to the subscriber special Doctor Who cross-over audio Return of the Daleks. And with the success of the Dalek Empire script book, I thought it was high time that the Dalek Empire universe crossed over into the Short Trips world. I boldly suggested myself as the editor and, very possibly, the sole author of the collection. But when the BBC7 Eighth Doctor and Lucie adventures entered my life, shortly followed by the executive producer job for all the Doctor Who audios, my plans for a Dalek Empire Short Trips collection fell by the wayside.

Cue the arrival of Good Samaritan (and writer) Simon Guerrier. Simon had always joked that he had a special connection with Dalek Empire, since he thought I'd named a planet in it after him - Guria. It was entirely coincidental, which he somehow has never believed. Anyway, Simon offered to do all the hard work of editing the collection, but insisted my name should remain on it. Very kind of him. And you'd think, out of gratitude for this, I'd select one of his excellent Dalek Empire stories for this collection. Wouldn't you? But, alas, I'm clearly as cold-hearted as a Dalek, because I've selected Jim Swallow's Museum Peace instead. Why? Because, unlike Simon, Jim cleverly chose to write about one of my characters, Kalendorf. And he did it so well, with such energy that ever since I first read it, I've wanted to make it into an audio production. I love it.

So... apologies to Simon. And congratulations to Jim!

Nicholas Briggs

Museum Peace
James Swallow

The rain drumming on the roof of the ground car became a rattle as the vehicle drew to a cautious halt at the kerbside. The driver glanced over her shoulder and gave him a curious look.

‘Sir, are you sure you want me to stop here? The weather today is -’

‘Good for my circulation,’ he rumbled. ‘Open the door.’

She nodded at the heavy marble columns of the entrance a short distance up the road. ‘I could park outside, Lord Chancellor. You’ll be soaked through if you walk.’

The use of the title made him smile a little. He hadn’t been that for years, not since this girl had been a child, at least; but he appreciated that she said it. It showed respect on her part, something he was seeing less and less. He pulled his greatcoat tighter. ‘You’re new, aren’t you?’

The driver nodded. ‘Yes, sir. Assigned to your detail this cycle.’
‘What’s your name?’

‘Mirin, sir. Agent Jasta Mirin. It’s an honour to be serving you.’

Ah. She was one of *those.* If he concentrated he could sense it, the ghost of thoughts at the edge of her mind. She’d read the books about the war, seen the holoplays, even that terribly melodramatic biography from a few summers back... The poor lass thought she was doing something important here, watching over a faded old warrior. He wanted to tell her that she ought to request a different posting, something that would stand her a better chance of advancement in the security service; but he had met her kind before and he did not have the cruelty in him to shatter her illusions. The truth was, the protection detail was only there as a hold-over from his former high office, a part of his pension from a grateful government. It wasn’t that he doubted he had enemies - he had

once said that the calibre of his foes was the very measure of his character - but there was a discreet laser pistol holstered at his waist, in the same place it had been for decades, and he was still confident enough in his own abilities to defend himself. The girl relented, seeing the firmness in his eyes, and released the maglock.

The car's gull wing door hissed open, letting the damp and cold reach inside. 'I'll be across the street if you need me, your lordship.'

He stepped out into the downpour and threw a weary smile back at her. 'You don't need to call me that. My name is Kalendorf. These days, only Kalendorf.'

Most people walked with their heads down, hunched forward against the driving rain, eyes to the slick pavements. Kalendorf turned up the coat's thick collar and met it in the face, taking some strange delight in the chill reality of it. He walked briskly across the Court of Cenotaphs, the heavy grey marble of the Great Museum rising up beyond the orchard of obelisks. The rain gave everything a sheen, a polished freshness that was at odds with the weight of history that pressed down upon all the monuments. He caught a glimpse of the War Memorial, the flanks of pale blue stone reaching toward the low, dull clouds. The names picked out along its sides glittered in black and gold, spiralling around, up and up. Clustered at the base, the tiny robot guides waited like patient birds. No one was calling on their services now, but on less inclement days visitors could ask them questions, or have them drift along the length of the memorial and highlight any name you would care to have them find.

He didn't need their help. He knew where to look to find Susan Mendes, Alby Brook, and all the others. His own name was on there too, somewhere. One day it would be inked in with black over the gold lettering, marking those who were gone; and there were countless names like that, dark among the glimmer of the living.

He left the plaza behind, mounting the steps, feeling the pressure in his knees already. His body was a good machine, finely tuned and still running well... but it was old, and Kalendorf seemed to feel it more each day. He hadn't been a young man when the war began

and, even though his kind were long-lived, it seemed like time was bearing down upon him. He wasn't as spry as he once was and his other, more ephemeral talents were gradually fading with disuse; just touching the girl's thoughts in the car had been taxing.

Crossing around the columns, he passed through the entrance, swiping an anonymous credit disc over the donation sensor. While other people peeled back their coats and shook off the rainwater, Kalendorf did the opposite, shrinking into his cover. He tapped lightly on the frame of his visor and let the glasses go opaque. The old soldier chided himself for leaving his hat in the ground car, but he had ordered Mirin not to drop him at the entrance for a reason. A government-issue limousine would draw the attention of the curators and he most certainly did not wish to be recognised. Not here and now. Today, Kalendorf wanted some time to think. Some peace. The galleries displaying the history of Vega's colonisation and the heritage of Old Earth were popular, as always, although the dreary weather had made attendance numbers sink. He knew the museum's layout by heart from countless visits before this one, and he took short cuts through the side halls, staying off the main corridors. Presently, Kalendorf crossed the edge of the central atrium, where the vast hologram of Vega VI and her moons drifted overhead in stately silence, and into the Hall ofDaleks.

He shied away from the sensor points where the virtual guide avatars lurked, ready to materialise in a cloud of pixels and spout pre-programmed nuggets of information. The hall was dominated by the sweep of an alien troop carrier's wingspan, the curved ship hovering silently up there on suspensors. Burn marks from particle-cannon fire remained visible along the ventral surface, a mute testament to the skill of the gunnery crews who had brought the thing down over the mountains outside the capital. Beneath, an intact Dalek transolar disc platform was canted at an angle so that visitors could study it close up. He passed under the grim shadow of the troopship without looking. Glass cabinets radiated out from the centre of the chamber, and inside each one there were various twists of wreckage or items of wartime hardware. Kalendorf saw broken- off eyestalks, luminosity dischargers and cracked sensor globes alongside spacefleet-issue maser rifles, tattered slave tunics and replica combat uniforms.

And at the far end of the hall, placed at greatest distance so that anyone who entered would not be frightened by coming upon them suddenly, there were the Daleks. These did not move or become animated through holography. These were corpses, dead shells interred in glass, presented for the people so they might know the face of the great enemy. They were left alone here; very few visitors were comfortable enough to come even within a few metres of them. The Hall of Daleks echoed with Kalendorfs footfalls and nothing else. There was a bench set a way back from the front of the cabinet, where he sat each time he visited. The old warrior did so once again, letting his greatcoat come open and unfold around him in a pool of dark, heavy material. Pulling off the visor, he ran a hand over the thin stubble on his chin and saw his own reflection in the glass. A craggy old fool with the face of a street fighter and eyes that had seen a lifetime of warfare. The lines of the man he once was, the iron will of a Knight of Velyshaa, that was still in there, buried somewhere deep; but he was tired all the time now and rest... Rest still seemed beyond his reach.

He sat and stared at the killing machines, letting time become permeable and thin. He drifted away from the moment. Kalendorf let Suz come back to him, that intent look of strength in her gaze suddenly there again. He remembered Alby and his dour humour, the recollection tugging at the corner of his lips. Yes, they were all still there, old friends faded and careworn by time; and he was still here, unable to let go of the war -

A noise made him snap back from his reverie. A party of schoolchildren, grumbling and sullen with the rain, came through the hall with a waspish tutor at their head. The arch woman had a beam pointer and she shone it this way and that, reading bits of text aloud from a data-slate wherever she settled. Kalendorf listened with half an ear as she held forth; not to the actual words, but to the intention and meaning she put behind them.

It tested him, but still he pressed ever so gently into her consciousness. She was cutting through the history of the Dalek War as quickly as she could, glossing over great swathes of information. The teacher's snapping discourse was keeping her pupils in line, but

Kalendorf could feel the discomfort in her. She didn't want to be here at all. And not once did her eyeline cross the cabinets at the far end of the hall.

He knew her sort. He had met them before, on too many occasions. The tutor thought the war was a terrible, horrific chapter in their history, the destructive era like a taint in the human psyche. She was trying to expunge it, to hide it away from these youngsters so they would grow up untroubled by dark memories of that time, when their great-grandparents were slaves to these alien dictators. In her own blinkered way, she meant well, but... His jaw hardened. Had he fought for this? Had Kalendorf strode through fire and sent friends to their deaths for this, so that generations later their sacrifices could be ignored by men and women too afraid to learn the lessons of history? He withdrew, annoyance clouding his face.

He became aware that one of the children had detached from the group and orbited closer to the case of Daleks. There was a line of light-coloured tiles set in the flooring a couple of metres beyond the cabinet and, in the old man's experience, visitors seldom ventured across it. A sandy-haired boy no more than a dozen cycles old hovered at the line, peering through the glass at him with slow, insolent curiosity. Kalendorf saw a steady trickle of recognition forming on the lad's face; it did not surprise him. After all, the Knight's portrait was just outside, over in the Hall of Chancellors. He gave the boy a hard and uncompromising stare.

'Get lost,' he growled in a low voice, and received a wide-eyed look in return.

The teacher called out and the child sloped back to her side,

following the party over to an enclosed holobooth near the entrance. She ushered them inside and the tinny recording of a war documentary began to unfold. Kalendorf snorted. The tutor and her children had been in the hall proper for less than five minutes. The boy shot him a last look from the booth and vanished within.

'Not the most popular of attractions, is it?'

The old soldier's head jerked around at the new voice and he winced at a dart of pain from his muscles. A younger man with curly, shoulder-length hair and an easy smile stood near the transolar disc. Kalendorfs combat training was always with him, even now. He registered straight away that the frock coat the man wore was completely dry, which meant he had either been in the museum for hours, or he was a member of staff. He couldn't have been the latter - they had a strict and rather bland dress code - and the former was unlikely, as the doors had opened only a few moments before Kalendorfs car had arrived. He frowned. What was disconcerting to him was the fact that he hadn't been aware of the man entering the hall. 'I suppose not,' he allowed.

The new arrival sank his hands in his pockets and crossed the line of tiles without pause, walking languidly up to the Dalek cabinet. Right up to it; not an arm's length away, not even a hand's. He stood almost with his nose against the barrier, just scant inches from the unblinking eyestalk of a Type Two Dalek Drone. Kalendorf had never seen anyone do that before, not in all the years he had visited the museum. The fearlessness on the man's face was something he hadn't seen for a long time. Not since the war.

'They don't look like much, do they?' he said quietly. 'Silly big pepperpots. Clumsy and awkward things. It would be hard to be afraid of them if you didn't know what they could do.'

Kalendorf found himself nodding, his confusion deepening. The way he talked, the tone of his voice... it was clear to the old Knight that this slight, unassuming fellow knew the Daleks as well as he did. But how could that be? He wasn't old enough to have faced them in battle. His bearing was as far from that of a military man as it could be. At best, he would have been a child in the closing days of the conflict.

He got a smile. 'Can I join you?' The man indicated the bench. Kalendorf pressed down on his wandering thoughts and reasserted his usual grim bearing. 'I'm not looking for any companions at the moment.'

'No, neither am I.' The reply seemed a little weary. He sat anyway,

ignoring Kalendorfs sour expression. ‘I remember when I first saw them, you know. A gang of tin-pot dictators living in the ashes of a dead empire, shouting and posturing. I thought that would be the last of them.’

‘The Daleks are gone.’ He said the words automatically, without conscious thought. It was a knee-jerk reaction, the sort of thing that one might say to a troubled child after a nightmare.

Soft grey eyes turned to him. ‘Do you really believe that?’

‘I want to.’ Kalendorf tensed, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. He hadn’t expected to reply so... so honestly to the stranger. It wasn’t like him. He was a Knight of Velyshaa, trained to be circumspect and careful in all things. There was an odd compulsion in him, a drawing-out inherent in the younger man’s manner. He didn’t like it. ‘We fought them and we beat them,’ he said, more firmly. ‘That’s all they are now, all they deserve to be.’ He stabbed a finger at the cabinets. ‘Relics. Monsters from the past.’

‘But people have a way of forgetting about the past.’ The other man nodded in the direction of the holobooth. ‘Don’t you think?’

And all at once it was there; the cold touch of awareness, the battle-sense that had taken Kalendorf through a thousand fights and skirmishes. The dark, animal instinct that made him the superlative soldier he was. *He knows who I am. He’s a potential threat.*

Gently, Kalendorfs hand slipped towards the laser pistol. All those thoughts of old foes back in the car, and now here they were. An assassin, he imagined, sent by any one of a dozen rivals. In his time, it hadn’t just been the Daleks that the Knight had brought to their knees. The Terrials, the Simbasa, the Celebi Compact; all of them still had the old man on their capture/kill lists. It wouldn’t be the first time they had tried to take him.

‘Kalendorf, please,’ said the man, carefully spreading his hands to show he wasn’t carrying any conventional weapons. ‘I’m a friend.’

‘I’ve buried all my friends.’ He had his fingers resting on the pistol

grip. ‘I’ll bury all my enemies as well.’ The Knight studied the man and *pushed.* His telepathic perception flowed out and brushed across the surface of... something. The new arrival smiled, letting him run the preternatural sense over his aura, like fingers sifting through sand. Kalendorfs breath caught in his throat. He had expected to touch a pebble and instead found a mountain. The man was impossibly ancient, by a magnitude the soldier found difficult to comprehend; and familiar too, but different with it. Confused, he blinked and let his psyche retreat, certain of only one thing. ‘I know you.’

‘I’m a friend, like I said. But I’m not surprised you don’t recognise me. It has been a long time since we met on Zaleria.’

‘You mean Spiridon,’ Kalendorf corrected automatically, the memory of the incident flooding back. ‘But you’re not him.’ He studied the man. On the surface, there wasn’t even the first iota of similarity between the small, acerbic stranger he had encountered during the Zalerian Occupation and this taller young fellow - except the eyes. The eyes were identical. They were full of that same alien distance, the same strange melancholy. He considered it for a moment. Perhaps it wasn’t so hard to accept after all; Kalendorf had seen entire worlds ripped from existence in a heartbeat, and creatures that had emerged from parallel realities. The idea of a being who could alter his physical form so radically was not so shocking in comparison.

‘I changed,’ came the reply, as if he saw the train of thought on the warrior’s face. ‘And I will again. But there are some things I have to do first.’ He glanced up at the silent machines.

‘Doctor.’ A curious smile formed on the soldier’s lips as he accepted it. ‘Hello again.’

‘Hello, Kalendorf. How have you been?’

‘Better,’ he admitted.

The condition of the mind was one of rage.

If there had ever been a time when the state had differed, there was no memory of it available for review. This seemed to be correct. Any other condition would have a lesser value, it would be ineffectual. There were some species - insignificant and weaker species - that would have considered it impossible for a mind to sustain such a state for so long. This was ample proof of their frailty, and perfect justification for their eradication. It also served to prove the superiority of the mind. It was this rich hate that allowed it to live, even when darkness and silence surrounded it. The purity of it, the utter clarity it provided, had remained unshakeable when all other things had been lost.

It had taken some time to reach this perfection of intent, however. That much was true. At the start, in the crippling, burning aftermath of the catastrophic silence, it had been difficult to think in an orderly fashion. Understanding had come very slowly as the new conditions of the mind's circumstances gradually revealed themselves. In those moments, as broken pieces of consciousness blinked in and out of awareness while the mind tried to repair itself, some species might have experienced emotional states such as fear. This was not what transpired. Such conditions were anathema to the mind and its like. They were the domain of lesser beings. Fear was something that it created, not experienced.

Mechanisms for chronological determination were inactive, and so the exact measure of how much time had passed between the burning, thunderous agony of the attack and the first proper understanding of the changes was lost. Feeling out the borders of what had gone on took many rels. Energy was spent, bled out through flash-purged batteries. Nutrient stores were compromised. Motive systems were completely destroyed. It was only possible for the broken, barely functional self-repair tools to operate, and only then at speeds a fraction of their normal capacity. Power trickled in drips from the external receptor plates, and the mind turned itself first to wringing every last erg from them. In time, what little remained of the casing's active sensors were reconnected. Damage was severe; vision quadrants were impaired, magnetic, thermal, quantum and microwave detection pallets operated far below optimal levels. Still, the mind tried to see beyond itself.

At first, comprehension was elusive. It gradually concluded that it was confined, although the method of incarceration was quite poor. It was only a thin barrier of translucent fused silica, one that a single blow could shatter. However, with its manipulator refusing to answer commands and an inability to move, the point was moot. Sometimes the mind was aware that it was being observed from outside its prison, but there seemed to be no method or rationale behind the surveillance. The humanoids that watched it stayed only for short periods, and never with anything that approximated guided intent. The root of the great anger began here, seeded in a moment of insight when an immature humanoid attacked the cell with a thrown piece of vegetable matter. Several others of similar age and appearance stood in front of the confinement. They emitted atonal sounds that the mind understood were directed at it. They were mocking it. They were no longer afraid.

But after hundreds of thousands of rels, the observers diminished almost to nothing. The mind was also aware of those trapped alongside it. Although the acuity of the optical sensor was intermittent, it perceived others of its kind through reflections on the inside of the barrier. On no occasion did the mind detect anything resembling awareness from its kindred. Attempts to generate a faint, localised electromagnetic pulse in order to communicate with them were fruitless. The inevitable conclusion was that the mind was quite alone. It concluded that the casing's long-range communications system was repairable, given much time and the dedication of almost all the available energy to the task. The mind decided; it would reconstruct this component and contact the rest of its kind, who had clearly been unaware of its conscious state when they abandoned it here. And then others would come, and the humanoids would be made to remember fear again.

However, with the next solar day, that decision changed.

The holobooth had reached the end of its display cycle and the tutor strode out with her charges in tow. The woman dispensed data- slates to each of the children and waved them off to begin their schoolwork assignments. Kalendorf saw the sandy-haired boy again, lurking at the edge of the chamber. He looked back at the

Doctor and considered him. Zaleria, decades ago now; he and Susan Mendes had been there. Years later Kalendorf came across fragmentary references to the renegade traveller, and they had stirred his interest for a time. It had even become a hobby of sorts before he tired of it, sifting through the data nets for references to a 'Time Lord' in a rectangular travelling machine; but there was nothing a regimented, well-ordered mind like his could grasp hold of. Kalendorfs life ran on information, on facts and not hearsay. The Doctor was a transient phenomenon, and there were more pressing demands on his time. There were other wars to be fought. Other enemies to be defeated.

But here he was again, decades later, changed and yet changeless. 'You knew we would win, didn't you? On Spiridon, even then you knew we would find victory.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't warn you about how things would turn out.'

He frowned. 'That device of yours, the blue box. So it is true that it can travel through time?'

'Yes.'

'Is it here, now?'

The Doctor looked away. 'Kalendorf, I -'

'Let me use it Let me go back to whenever they were spawned and destroy them. Let me be *sure,* Doctor.' He felt his pulse race at the thought of it.

The Time Lord got up and walked away a few steps. 'I had that chance once,' he said, spreading his palms. 'In my hands.'

The Knight's lip twisted. 'And you hesitated, didn't you? I can see the echo of that instant in your thoughts. You weren't willing to become them in order to destroy them, yes?' He stood and faced the Doctor. 'But that was a long time ago. And as you say, you have changed.'

‘Not that much.’

‘Are you sure?’ He gestured around. ‘Why are you here, Doctor? Is there something you want from me? This is a strange place to look for a confessional.’

He was silent for a long moment, as if he were trying to find away to frame his thoughts. ‘There’s a place called Tsan, do you know it?’ When the old man shook his head, the Doctor turned and forced a smile. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ He paused. ‘What do I want? I want the same thing you do, Kalendorf. I want peace.’

‘But are you willing to destroy for it?’

The Doctor shook his head suddenly. ‘This is a mistake. I shouldn’t have come here. 1 should go.’

Kalendorf moved, blocking his path as the Time Lord tried to move around the cabinet. ‘No. Not yet. You came here for a reason.’ He met the Doctor’s gaze and saw the shadow of a terrible choice lurking behind his eyes; it was a feeling he knew too well. ‘Let me tell you the truth, Doctor. I don’t want peace. I’ve been a soldier all my days, and I know peace is a fantasy. Conflict is part of our nature, and we’ll never truly be free of it. No, what I want is to know that at least this war,’ he nodded at the Daleks, ‘my war, is over.’ Kalendorf saw the boy in front of the glass display case, trying to pretend he wasn’t watching them intently. He lowered his voice. ‘These people don’t know the horror of it, not in the way that you or I do, and they won’t be ready if it returns. I can’t go to my grave knowing that they’ll be unprepared if the Daleks come back.’

The Doctor’s reply chilled him to the core. ‘I’m not certain that it can ever be over.’

Through the mind’s sporadic visual inputs, it detected the arrival of a humanoid male, typically appearing on a regular interval of approximately six hundred and ninety one thousand, two hundred rels. At first, with its attentions solely focused on the matter of the communications repairs, it gave the male only cursory consideration; that was until a random scan program switched to

the front of the mind's consciousness and dragged a classification from the fractured depths of the casing's memory banks.

Kalendorf. Humanoid Male. Tribal identifier: Knight of Velyshaa. Category: Enemy of the Daleks. Action: Exterminate on sight.

The mind drew more from the data files, learning the scope of the humanoid's crimes. This creature, this primitive had dared to incite rebellion against its masters. The Kalendorf male's value was considerable, and the orders were clear.

For a time, the mind weighed its options. Directing repairs away from the communications system to the casing's inert primary weapon would negate any possibility of recovery. It would take longer to bring the gun to combat readiness, and then longer still to gather enough power to fire it; but then there were no guarantees the communicator's signal would reach a command nexus. By human reckoning, the slow process of repair would take years, and the mind would have to work carefully and quietly, keeping the functioning of its systems to a level that the prison's monitoring devices would not be able to detect. The procedure would be long and laborious, and it would require a singular, pathological application of intent.

In the end, there really was no question of priorities. It was in the mind's power to exterminate Kalendorf, and so it would.

'In my thoughts, I played out this meeting with you a hundred times,' Kalendorf felt the tension of the moment settling in his bones, and he returned to the bench. 'I imagined all sorts of dazzling, airtight logic that I could put to you that would convince you to let me erase them from history. But then I never saw you again and I became convinced your time machine was just a fairy tale.' He gave a rueful smile. 'But still... Do you know, back when I was in my second term as Lord Chancellor, I even had a black projects group created to investigate the potential of temporal weapons? We were going to build a bomb to send into the past. I wanted to find Skaro and obliterate it before life had even formed on its surface.'

‘I know,’ admitted the Doctor. ‘Your people were doing quite well for a while. But it would have upset the balance of things.’

The Knight’s face creased. The project’s failure had ultimately cost him his re-election. ‘And you can’t have that, can you? It’s fine for you to intervene here and there, shift the flow of a small stream now and then. But to dam the whole river? Somehow that’s wrong.’

‘I’ve had this conversation more times than I’ve saved the universe,’ retorted the Time Lord, ‘and no one ever really understands it. History is not binary, Kalendorf. One-zero, on-off, life-death. It doesn’t work that way. What the Daleks have done, who they are and what they will do, those things have already been written on the face of the universe. In the cracks in between we can change things, little things...’ His voice drifted off. ‘At least, I used to think that was true.’

Kalendorf shook his head. ‘You have the ability to exterminate the Daleks, Doctor. If what they say about you is true, you always have.’

‘There has to be another way!’ The burst of anger from the other man came out of nowhere, and the Knight was shocked by its ferocity. ‘Why does it all have to end in destruction, old soldier? Can you tell me that? Why does it have to be death?’

Once again, he sensed the icy pressure there in the Doctor’s mind, the ghost of a decision that dwarfed the worst judgements Kalendorf had ever had to make; and all at once he understood why the Time Lord was here. ‘You have a choice, Doctor. I can only discern the vaguest edges of it, the size and complexity of the moment.’ His hand went to his lips. ‘Oh, I pity you. It’s hollowed you out, hasn’t it? Such a great, awful choice to make. That’s why you came to speak to me. Because you know I am a warrior, because my gift allows me an insight into what you are facing.’

The Doctor’s face was pale, a faint sketch of the warm, smiling aspect he had shown on his arrival. ‘The chance to free the universe of the Daleks. But the price... The price is everything I know.’

The weapon had been ready for quite some time. The mind gathered in the energy to fire and kept it hidden, deep in the casing, shunting the power to the core of the battery packs where it lay out of range of the cell's detectors. There had already been a number of occasions when the target Kalendorf had presented himself before the cabinet, but the mind understood from the humanoid's records that he was a unique quarry. He would see any motion from the gun and avoid it, so the shot had to come while the emitter barrel was static. This narrowed the attack options significantly. In addition, the performance of the casing's optical sensor array was deteriorating. Incidents of blackouts and imaging disruption were now occurring with increased regularity, and the mind estimated that total failure of the vision system was likely to occur very soon. Even now, focal depth monitoring was discontinuous. The target Kalendorf was visible at the edge of the optical sensor envelope, but the engagement zone was cluttered by the appearance of another humanoid male. Automatically, the mind swept the second biped with its recognition scan.

The Doctor. Gallifreyan Male. Tribal identifier: Time Lord. Category: Enemy of the Daleks. Fiction: Exterminate on sight.

For the briefest of moments, rage gave way to surprise; then the fury returned tenfold. The mind had been presented with two of the most valued targets in the memory bank's inventory, both equally hated, both equally deserving. The killing urge rose, and the power flowed up and into the weapon's pre-fire chamber. The gun announced its readiness, the coiled energy for one single, lethal burst of radiation ready to be unleashed. There would be only one shot, and after it was released, the mind understood that what fragmentary existence it still had would be forfeit; but it would be worth it, to show that the reach of its race was unbound, that their revenge was limitless.

And carefully, the Dalek made the choice of which of them to murder.

It happened with horrific speed.

In the periphery of his vision, Kalendorf saw the beam weapon shift

the most infinitesimal of fractions, dipping so that the grey Dalek could have a clear line of fire. In his mind, he was still the young man, still the vital and indomitable Knight capable of winning wars single-handed; but time had robbed him of that reality. As fast as his nerves sent the impulses, his age-worn muscles could not match them. As swift as he was, Kalendorf was still too slow, fingers tightening on the laser, tearing the compact pistol from the folds of his greatcoat, crying out. He saw the Doctor turning, throwing out his hands in a gesture of protection, shouting. Too late. Too late.

The blue-white beam of coherent energy shattered the glass cabinet. The shriek of superheated air molecules crashed about the chamber, the horribly familiar sound cutting into Kalendorfs soul. He had prayed that he would never hear that noise again.

The boy took the shot point-blank in the chest, for one monstrous second his flesh flashing translucent with the killing discharge, the tiny frame of his skeleton visible. The child died without a scream, falling to the marble floor.

Kalendorfs pistol sprayed laser bolts up the length of the Dalek, tearing through its casing and ripping it apart. Decrepit, decayed organic components boiled away.

The Dalek attempted to speak, but all that came out was a strangled, grating death rattle.

Adrenalin shock flooded through the old man, and he began to tremble. It was difficult to hold the gun, but he kept his fingers tight around it. It was comforting, in its own sad way.

Crouching over the child, the Doctor closed the sandy-haired boy's eyes and did not look up. 'It was still alive. After all that time.'

Alarms were sounding all through the building, the internal security sensors alight with the discharge from the weapons. 'Yes.' Kalendorf cast a practised gaze over the alien killer. 'It would have been inert when they found it, must have escaped the detectors of the recovery crews. No one could have known.' He nudged a shattered hemisphere with his boot. 'It must have been gathering energy for

years through its solar collectors...' The Knight looked up at the tiny skylight in the roof 'Hoarding every scrap of power. Waiting for the right moment.'

'But to kill a child...' The Doctor's indignant anger was towering. 'What possible threat could he have been to it?'

Kalendorf studied the Dalek's eyestalk. Part of the lens was milky-white. 'The optic sensor was badly damaged. It couldn't see him. He was... He was just in the line of fire.' He looked away. 'A new victim in an old war.'

With great delicacy, the Doctor gathered up the boy's body. The Knight holstered his pistol and took the boy from him. 'This is the price, Doctor,' he husked, his voice thick with emotion. 'Every child, every being that lives is under threat so long as the Daleks exist. You must make the choice, Doctor, whatever it is, whatever it costs you.' Kalendorf walked from the hall and did not look back. The tutor came running, the indelible horror shattering her thoughts, The Knight felt the rough edges of them as he passed her by, as she fell to her knees and began to weep. The tidal drag of long-buried nightmares pulled at her, as her children stood around in a loose halo, not understanding what had happened.

The boy was light. He carried him out through the halls, out between the towering pillars of the entrance and past the milling, panicking people. Some of them were as old as he was, some of them had the old fear in their eyes. Yes, he wanted to tell them, the war still goes on.

The soldier crossed to the base of the memorial and the guide robots shuffled out of his way. Kalendorf knelt and lay the dead child on the broad stone plinth. He felt empty. What was the boy's name? He had nothing to hand that he could use to carve it into the stone. After a moment he stepped back and let his gaze range up along the height of the memorial.

Splashing, frantic footsteps signalled Mirin's approach behind him. 'Lord Chancellor!' she shouted. The woman had a stub-gun in her hand, panning it about in search of any aggressors. 'Are you all

right, sir?'

'I'm not wounded,' Kalendorf replied.

'The museum!' Mirin said breathlessly. 'I heard the alarms! The security scanners said a Dalek attacked you in there!' He could tell she could hardly believe it. 'There was weapons fire and -'

'The Dalek is dead,' he spoke over her. 'There was only one casualty.'

The agent's panting slowed as she saw the boy. 'Oh.' Her composure slipped for a moment, then returned. Duty first, just as he expected from her. 'But the other man. The scanners recorded a third person in the hall. He seems to have vanished. Do you know who he was, sir?'

Kalendorf turned his face to the rain. 'Someone looking for peace.'

Short Trips: Destination Prague

My own introduction to the Short *Trips* line came rather fortuitously. I heard from a friend of a friend that Big Finish were doing audio adventures featuring the old Doctors and figured what the heck, worth a shot. I mean, come on, it's *Doctor* Who, and what other chance would an oik like me have of being a part of the Time Lord's heritage? So I mailed the office, introducing myself. At the time Elemental had just come out via TOR in the US. It was fairly well received anthology with the likes of Sir Arthur C Clarke, Kevin J Anderson and Brian Herbert, Sean Williams and others in it. As it was the line was booked up, but Ian Farrington was neck deep in editing The *Centenarian* and asked if I'd like to write a story for it. How could I say no?

Six months after Falling From X'ian I got a call asking if I'd be interested in editing one of the forthcoming Short Trips line. I thought about it for, hmmm, all of 20 seconds and said 'Hell yes!' The idea behind Destination Prague was to do for a city what The *Centenarian* had done for a man, follow its life from start to finish. I looked at the list of people I'd worked with on Elemental, and remembered a distant conversation with Sean about the announced rebirth of the Doctor in the guise of Christopher Eccleston, and Sean's enthusiasm for all things Doctorish. He seemed like an obvious invite. As a New York Times #i Bestselling Novelist he was also one hell of a catch for the line. Not only that, Sean is pretty much Mr Award in Australian Science Fiction. He's won the lot, and more than once. So the idea of him writing the Doctor was EXCITING.

And when Midnight in the *Cafe of* the Black *Madonna* arrived I wasn't disappointed. Sean's an old-school science fiction writer, in that the science is important, not 'handwavium' meant to sound good. That was another idea behind Destination Prague, I wanted to bring in some well-known science fiction writers to see what they'd do with the Doctor. It's funny, I remember the original response from Ian Farrington when he read Sean's story: "Wow, that Sean Williams really can write." I think that sums it up.

It was a privilege to be a part of the Short Trips line, as both writer and editor, and I really can't thank Ian and the guys enough. So, without further ado, welcome to the Cafe of the Black Madonna....

Steven Savile

Midnight in the Café of the Black Madonna

Sean Williams

An Adventure of the Third Doctor

The time had come to run, so that's exactly what Kan did. He ran down broad thoroughfares lined with inert vehicles, all four of his legs at full stretch. He galloped along lanes so narrow that his armour knocked holes in cornices and snapped metal lamp posts like saplings. He thundered across bridges, shaking loose centuries of accumulated bird droppings. He ran until the mighty bellows of his lungs burned and the very muscles that might deliver him to salvation threatened to melt.

The alarms grew louder behind him, audible through the sensitive tissues of his feet. His relatively fragile ears were folded flat against his head and neck. He held his nose upright in challenge, but saw no one on the shadowy streets. That was why he had chosen them. But still the subsonic clamour pursued him. No matter where he ran it came after him, as relentless as time — or guilt.

Doubt sapped the strength in his limbs. He could hear the gasping of his breath growing steadily more desperate. What if he had done the wrong thing? What if, for all his convictions, he had chosen the wrong moment to act?

He took a corner clumsily and righted himself without falling, though it cost him a jarred knee and strained spine. His combat armour asked him again whether he wanted it to activate, to take some of the load his body was enduring. He told it no. If he switched it on the others would know where he was. They could freeze him solid in his artificial skeleton, like a body in a coffin, ready for -

He skidded in alarm. Someone was standing in the street ahead. Not one of his kind — two-legged like the Enemy but with only one set

of arms and eyes. It was turning to flee but Kan was moving too quickly, with all his body's considerable momentum. It was too late to avoid a collision.

With all the grace of an eight-ton ballet dancer, Kan leapt, scooped up the creature between his right tusk and nose, and rolled. Tucking his head down protectively, he ignored the pounding his body took as it tumbled end over end. This punishment he could endure. He was not a murderer, even an accidental one. He would not allow it.

They crashed to a halt against the side of a building, cracking masonry and splintering beams. Windows shattered; thousands of silver shards rained down on them both. Kan blinked and, groaning, strained to right himself. The creature was still clutched to his chest, but it was no longer moving. Its white hair puzzled him, and the strange clothes it wore. So soft against the delicate nerves of his nose, so beautiful...

The throbbing of alarms, temporarily forgotten, rose up around him. He could hear engines now as well as alarms, and the pounding of feet growing nearer. Lights in the sky swooped over him, heavy aircraft riding columns of swirling air. Kan hunched his shoulders and activated his armour, prepared to fight now that all hope was lost.

'Specialist Kandula!' boomed a voice, and Kan felt his courage fail.

'He's over here, lads! Get a move on! We've not got all day, you know!' Among the dozens of ground troops converging on the scene, one Crei stood tallest and proudest. His epaulettes were wider, his tusks longer and sharper. His ceremonial armour shone from extensive polishing. The tip of his nose bobbed higher than any other.

Kan fought the inbred urge to submit to a superior and raised himself up to full height. 'Commander Ezrehard,' he started to say, 'there's something I must tell you.'

'I can see it with my own eyes,' trumpeted the commander as he approached. 'While we wasted time capturing the vehicle, you ran

down the one who arrived in it. Nicely done, my good fellow. Nicely done! You've earned yourself another commendation.'

'Vehic- uh, I have, sir?'

'Yes, indeed. Aren't you the one who pinpointed the collision in the first place? I believe I can find a new duty where your quick thinking can be put to even better use.'

'A new duty, sir?'

'If' wanted an echo, Kandula, I'd talk into a well.'

The creature hanging limply from under Kan's nose was taken from him by three specialists and carried away. Behind the commander, a rectangular blue box that he had never seen before stood on the back of a troop flatbed. The white-haired alien was carefully secured next to it.

'Where did they come from, sir?'

'That's up to you to find out, *Sergeant* Kandula. Discover their secrets and further promotion awaits. I'm putting Squadron J at your full disposal.' That was nearly enough to make Kan faint. He wasn't to be blamed, court-martialled or shot. In fact, he had been promoted. What a strange shore fate had guided him to!

Somehow Kan managed to salute without keeling over. He sagged gratefully into his armour as the commander turned and marched away.

A dozen soldiers watched Kan with blank impassivity. Eventually he realised that they were waiting for him to give them an order.

'To Science Section HQ' he barked, waving his nose in a feeble imitation of Commander Ezrehard's imperiousness. The flatbed carrying the alien and its strange artefact reversed and trundled off. Kan followed, almost daring to think that his mission might not fail after all...

The Doctor's eyes flickered open. He had been dreaming about a jungle, the Amazon perhaps, and woke with a nagging feeling that he had lost something important. Something or someone...

His head was pounding, a feeling made only worse when he tried to sit up. A thick strap across his chest kept him thoroughly immobile. He could barely turn his head to look around.

He was lying in a very large tent, one filled with lights and equipment. It didn't look like a prison. It more resembled a UNIT field tent, except the scale was completely wrong. The ceiling hung at least four metres above him, and the tools were much too heavy for a human to lift. He briefly considered the possibility that he had shrunk while unconscious, but dismissed it as unlikely.

The explanation lay to his right, where four elephants clad in high-tech exoskeletons were probing the TARDIS with advanced sensors. A series of irritated bleeps and buzzes indicated their lack of progress so far.

From somewhere in the distance came the sound of crunching masonry. That, finally, revived the memory of how he had come to be there. Part of it, anyway. A young human girl called Jo and his need to go far away, very quickly...

'Excuse me,' he called. 'Might I have a word with someone in authority?'

The four elephants turned instantly to face him. Their movements were less ponderous than those of a terrestrial pachyderm, and a second glance revealed that, for all their superficial similarities, these were entirely different creatures, with four sensitive nodules on the end of each trunk, tusks carved to signal rank, and armour clearly assisting their movements. Tool-users, not zoo exhibits.

'I have authority here,' said one, shouldering forward. His trunk rose in a clear gesture of dominance. 'Identify yourself and explain your presence.'

'Well, I'm the Doctor,' he said. That was the easy part. 'I'm here by

accident, wherever I am. My ship was caught in a temporal trap. I was looking for the source of the trap when you found me. It *was* you, wasn't it? Yes.' He recognised the tufts of bristly white hair around the creature's ears — and a desperation in its eyes that it probably hoped was invisible. 'I'm grateful to you for not trampling me to death.'

The creature ignored his thanks. 'I am Sergeant Kandula of the Crei Imperative. You will explain to me the purpose of this device.' The trunk indicated the TARDIS.

'That is my ship.'

'It is too small to be capable of hypertemporal travel.'

'Looks are often deceiving. Much like this place, I'd say.' More details came to him of the moments between his arrival and the collision with his captor. 'I could almost swear it was Prague.'

The creature's eyebrows went up. 'You are familiar with this domicile?'

'This city? Why, yes, I've been here on the odd occasion. There's something terribly wrong with it now, though.' He remembered streets full of empty cars, and piles of clothing where people had once been standing. The air was as dead as a tomb's under a sky empty of stars. And far away, the sound of buildings being demolished. 'If you'd be so kind as to let me go —'

The straps were already retreating. 'You are an innocent traveller,' declared Sergeant Kandula of the Crei Imperative. 'Your presence here is accidental and does not constitute a threat. You may even be of use to us.'

'That's very reasonable of you, my good man. People aren't always so understanding.' The Doctor brought himself upright and took the coat offered to him on the end of Sergeant Kandula's trunk. He nodded his thanks and shrugged it on.

'Come with me,' said the sergeant, nudging him with a tusk towards

the tent's gaping entrance.

'I'd be delighted to.'

In the relatively open air, Kan successfully fought waves of trembling that threatened to render his muscles useless. He was exhausted by the ongoing portrayal of obedience. Commander Ezrehard had been by three times already, demanding to know what he had learned of the alien and its contraption. The search for the Tipping Device wasn't going well, it seemed. Kan would have to come up with something soon.

The creature called the Doctor turned his minuscule head to take in the city around them.

'This really is Prague,' the alien declared, trumpeting in a perfectly unexpected but comprehensible rendition of the Crei tongue. 'You've lifted it out of the space-time continuum and left the people behind. Remarkable. May I ask why?'

'In a moment, Doctor.' Kan led the alien and the guards to a nearby corner, where a statue of a dark-skinned human female gazed impassively over the intersection below. An improvised but relatively comfortable officers' mess filled the building behind it.

The Doctor tsked at the walls knocked out and furniture pushed to one side, the ceilings raised or entirely removed. 'The original architect wouldn't be pleased, in his silent way. What was it Josef used to say? "Whoever says too much feels too little." Admirable sentiments, don't you think, Sergeant Kandula?'

The power of the alien's gaze was out of all proportion to its size. 'We are travellers,' Kan said, pulling up a sturdy bench and resting his weight upon it. The Doctor sat with his two legs folded on a boxy chair from the original furniture as the guards took up positions around the exits. 'Like you, Doctor, we travel through the interstices of space, where the laws of physics are mutable and accidents can be both subtle and devastating. We are here because of one such accident. An essential component from our ship's inner workings disappeared in transit as a result of a freak interaction

with the real universe. A hyperspatial collision, if you like. Immediately upon noticing the component's absence, we backtracked to the point of the collision, where an inhabited world had unwittingly crossed our path. I say "unwittingly" because it is clear that the world's inhabitants intended us no malice. They are irrelevant to us. But their world itself is not. Our paths crossed the centre of one of its major landmasses. Requiring the missing component as a matter of some urgency, we have extracted that crucial point from the planet and begun our search.'

'I see. Hence the city, the time trap, and the demolition I can hear. You still haven't found this inconvenient component of yours, I assume.'

'No, Doctor. The search is proving more complicated than we anticipated. The component, you see, consists of an atom of gold.'

The alien's silver eyebrows rose higher on its small forehead. 'A single atom?'

'I'm afraid so, one tailored for a very specific function.'

'So, of course, it can't be replaced. Rather foolish of you to lose it, eh?' The Doctor folded his hands in an inverted V in front of him. 'Still, there must be an easier way to go about finding it than by tearing Prague apart, stone by stone. That's a very primitive solution to a sophisticated problem.'

'I concur completely,' Kan said with perhaps more sincerity than was wise. 'But there are no obvious alternatives.'

'Well, why don't you let me take a look at this ship of yours? Perhaps I can help you repair it.'

'I fear your help in that regard would be insufficient.'

'You know, I've never once thought of myself as such.'

'We are inside the ship at this very moment, you and I and all of "Prague".'

‘Really? Good grief.’ Kan watched the Doctor look out of the smashed windows in surprise. ‘How absolutely remarkable.’

Kan kept his emotions carefully private. ‘You claim to know this city. Help us find the component. Without it, our mission cannot possibly succeed.’

‘Quite. But perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me first, Sergeant Kandula: what is your mission, exactly?’

‘A merciful one, Doctor. Our leaders have charged us to end a war.’ He wiped sweat from his brow with one sweep of his nose. ‘You see the urgency of our situation. The sooner we find the component, the sooner we can leave.’

‘And the sooner this fine old city can be returned to its proper place and time.’ The Doctor’s strange articulated limbs gripped the arm of the chair. ‘Very well. Let’s get on with it, then.’

‘Excellent, Doctor — but be assured that your ship will be kept securely here until we return. Any attempt to escape will be futile.’

‘I am a prisoner, then?’

‘I wouldn’t use such a clumsy term.’

‘They often don’t,’ said the Doctor, rising to his feet and dusting himself down, ‘but the meaning’s always the same.’

No, Kan silently disagreed. I’m putting the thought into your head.

Together, accompanied by their retinue of guards, they headed out into the ancient city.

They drove on the back of a floating flatbed under the starless sky — in reality, the Doctor now realised, the interior of a massive cargo bay in the belly of an even larger ship — past blank-faced buildings in the Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque styles. None of the facades in the Old Town Square appeared to be damaged, but

he could hear the sound of high-tech jackhammers tearing up streets not so far away. He needed to think quickly.

By the look of the clothes and vehicles left behind, he estimated the city's date of capture to be around the twenty-fourth century. A thousand years, then, after the death of the man whose statue still dominated the square, and whose life and beliefs had led to the Bohemian wars and the invention of armed infantry. Pondering that detail, he decided on the following plan:

'Gold is a unique substance. Of several isotopes, one, Gold-197, is perfectly stable. It'll last for eternity, give or take, and that's why it's built into so many important systems. This temporal permanence can also cause problems, as you've discovered. Gold doesn't like leaving its proper time, you see, and can drag a wake through the real universe when you force it to. If that wake catches on any other gold, a resonance can form, dragging it back into the continuum. Like a fisher's net snagging a reef, if you will. Look for outcrops of gold in the city and you're likely to find your missing piece.'

'We have already looked, Doctor,' Sergeant Kandula said with an impenetrable expression. 'Our instruments scanned the city from edge to edge. The Tipping Device is not in an open space or one lightly concealed from our senses. It must therefore be hidden where even our keenest instruments cannot reach. Can you think of a likely location?'

'A couple of places come to mind.' He considered for a moment. 'An old friend might be able to help us.'

'There is someone else in the city?'

'I'm being metaphorical, old chap. Don't the Crei have metaphors?'

'They are discouraged.'

'To your detriment.' He sighed. 'No, the friend I'm talking about has been dead a very long time. And strictly speaking it's not him we're going to visit. It's his nose. It may not be as useful as yours,

Sergeant Kandula, but it may hold the solution to all our problems...'

The Doctor told the story while the flatbed pilot drove them to the cemetery. It was almost too horrible to contemplate. A long time ago, a human astronomer called Tycho Brahe had lost his nose in a duel. Luckily for the astronomer, a human's nose was largely ornamental, so a facsimile made of wax and gold was sufficient to repair the disfigurement.

'Naturally it was buried with him, in the Old Jewish Cemetery,' said the Doctor, guiding them through the winding streets to a patch of ground covered with thousands of monuments, all leaning and twisted like snaggled teeth.

Kan activated the flatbed's repulsors to lift them over the monuments to the place the Doctor indicated.

'Be gentle, if you wouldn't mind,' said the alien, as automated excavating machines went to work. 'He's been dug up once already.'

The machines made short work of the damp earth. Soon a casket was revealed and lifted into view. The Doctor waved away the guards, and went to work with a small sonic tool of his own until the lid was loose.

'If it's here,' he said to Kan, 'you'll know?'

'Immediately after the lead shielding is removed.'

The Doctor nodded his alien head and heaved on the lid. It fell aside, revealing a skeletal figure draped with the rotten remains of finery. Kan gestured with his nose at the small cone resting lopsided on the dead alien's skull. Sensors focused upon it, seeking the unique neutronic signature.

He kept his face carefully blank as the results came in. 'Negative, Doctor. The Device is not present.'

'Ah, well.' The Doctor sighed. 'I'm sorry, my friend,' he said,

adjusting a scrap of errant cloth around the corpse's neck and sliding the lid back into place. 'We disturbed you for nothing.'

'He is dead, Doctor. He cannot be disturbed.'

'No, but his memory can be.' The Doctor wiped his hands on his green jacket and leaped back up into the flatbed. 'Fill the hole in, and we'll try somewhere else.'

Kan issued the orders.

'Second time lucky, eh?' The Doctor indicated that the flatbed should turn left at the first major crossroads after the cemetery. He found it eerie being driven around the empty city, past cars that had stalled in the middle of the road or descended on autopilot when their occupants had been removed. There was no sound apart from that of alien machinery. He was afraid to ask how many buildings had been ground into dust in the quest for the mysterious Tipping Device.

'I hope you're not thinking of escaping,' said the sergeant, apropos of nothing.

Why *did* Kandula keep bringing that up?

'Turn right here,' the Doctor told the Crei driver, pointing along a wide stone bridge flanked by 16 triangular ice guards. They passed under the arch of an empty tower and onto the broad thoroughfare itself. At over half a kilometre long, the bridge was adorned with no fewer than thirty statues.

The Doctor ordered the flatbed to stop in front of the third one on the north side, a tall, bronze crucifix with two grieving people standing at its base. 'See that sign up there?'

Under the 'arms' of the cross hung a series of gold letters in an arc. Sergeant Kandula squinted at them. 'I see symbols, but they — no, wait — I can read them! "Holy, Holy, Holy," uh, something, "of Hosts".'

‘Yes, that’s exactly right. Well done.’

‘How can I read that? I am not proficient in this planet’s languages.’ ‘Never mind that right now. It’s a long story.’ The Doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose, keeping to himself the knowledge of the gift he had shared with so many companions. The thought reminded him of Jo. ‘The sign, as you’ve noticed, isn’t complete. There’s a letter missing, rendering one of the words meaningless. The missing letter is a vav from the Hebrew alphabet. It was stolen in the twentieth century under mysterious circumstances. The bridge is under constant camera surveillance, you see. No one could explain how it was accomplished.’

‘If it’s missing, of what value is it to us now?’

‘Its value lies in the fact that I know where it’s hidden.’ The Doctor winked. ‘Drive on, will you? Take us to the last statue on the far end of the bridge. Then we’ll see what we will see.’

Kan suppressed his anxiety as they crossed the short distance. The riverbed beneath the bridge was muddy and pungent, cut off from its source the moment the city had been wrenched out of the universe. He clenched the end of his nose shut and thought of his homeworld’s scented air, long lost to the far-flung legions of Crei when the Enemy had struck. A shudder rippled through him at the memory of what he had seen in the aftermath. He could not countenance such horror, or any repeat of it. Better that the Crei die out than let their existence be defined by vengeance and -

‘There, there, old fellow. There’s no need to fret.’

The touch of the Doctor’s hand on his armoured left shoulder made him jump. ‘Do not approach!’ he trumpeted. ‘Keep back!’

‘Steady on, steady on. I’m just trying to reassure you. We’ll find this missing component of yours — and not before time, I’d say. You’ve been on edge too long, by the look of you. Post-traumatic stress is a terrible thing. I’ve seen it many times before. You lost someone close to you, I presume.’

‘My herd-mother,’ he said before he could stop himself. ‘My brothers, my sire — all gone.’ His chest wheezed. ‘All dead.’

‘Prague is no stranger to grief,’ said the alien with genuine sympathy.

‘I recently lost a friend myself. Not to death, I’m pleased to say, but I miss her dearly all the same. Friendships can be fleeting things. Would you call us friends, Sergeant Kandula?’

‘Allies,’ he croaked.

‘Strange, because my ship thinks otherwise, given you read the sign back there.’

‘Your ship — it thinks?’

‘Again, a long story.’

The flatbed decelerated, and Kan forced himself to concentrate. The last statue consisted of three robed humans standing on stained, stone plinths. One held a cross; the other two carried jar-like containers.

‘Note the figure on the left,’ said the Doctor. ‘Cosmas, as he was called, trained as a doctor in Syria two thousand years ago. Unlike some, he became a very good one. This isn’t a very flattering likeness, though. He’d be decidedly unhappy with the nose.’

‘Have you met everyone, Doctor?’

‘Not for want of trying.’

The alien jumped with surprising nimbleness from the flatbed to the wall next to the statue. The jar in the stone hands possessed a circular base, which the Doctor unscrewed. A single golden letter dropped into his palm.

‘How did you know it would be there?’ Kan asked, amazed.

‘Put that one down to the misadventures of youth,’ the alien said, resealing the stone container with a perfunctory twist. ‘Humans may not always acknowledge it, Sergeant Kandula, but a good mystery makes life altogether more interesting.’ He winked one tiny eyelid. ‘Test it, man, and let’s know for sure.’

The scan, once again, came up negative.

‘Hmmm.’ The Doctor worried at his mane of white hair. ‘This is proving to be quite a conundrum. What about your friends elsewhere? Could they have found the answer by now?’

‘You wriggle like an eel in a net,’ Kan said, hoping that the Doctor would take the hint this time. ‘Why are you in such a hurry to leave?’

‘Why are you so keen on keeping me here?’ The Doctor leapt back aboard the flatbed. ‘Anyone would think you’re overcompensating — but for what? And for whose benefit, eh?’

‘Report, Sergeant Kandula!’ boomed an elephantine voice from the Crei officer’s chest plate. ‘Promotion awaits a positive reply!’

‘My investigation is proceeding,’ replied Kandula by some form of radio, the Doctor presumed. ‘We have not yet, however, located the Tipping Device.’

‘Too slow, Kandula! I need results. The clock is ticking, you know.’

‘I do know, sir, and I am doing my very best —’

‘Not good enough. Do more! Don’t make me regret putting my faith in you.’ The communication ended with an abrupt click.

‘My commander is in a hurry,’ said the sergeant, shuffling his broad feet to an inaudible but decidedly anxious beat.

‘He certainly sounded so, yes.’ The Doctor cupped his chin and thought hard. The more time he spent with Sergeant Kandula, the more inconsistent his behaviour seemed. ‘All right. Let’s try right

back where we started. There's a clock in the Old Town Square, an astronomical clock, as a matter of fact. I know it's still there because I saw it when we set out. But —' He feigned a sudden thought. 'It won't be running now, will it? Time is stopped here in the city. You and I are protected by the trap itself, which recognises us as external influences.'

Kandula nodded his great, domed head. 'That is correct, Doctor.'
'Which only makes it all the more puzzling that your commander said that his "clock" was "ticking". I thought the Crei didn't use metaphors. He must have been talking about something specific, then, a timekeeper originating outside the city. Why exactly are you in such a hurry, again?'

'That is a Crei military secret,' said Kandula, again radiating that strange impression of saying words he didn't mean — or *not* saying what he truly wanted to convey.

'Yes, I thought as much.' The Doctor's lips pursed in irritation. 'The Tipping Device is a trigger, isn't it? One of the unstable isotopes of gold programmed to set off some sort of weapon when it decays. Gold-198, perhaps, with a half-life of three days; or Gold-194, with barely a day and a half. How much time do you have left before the device explodes, Sergeant Kandula? And who was supposed to be on the receiving end?'

'The Enemy,' Kandula said in a hollow voice. 'It will utterly destroy them.'

'There's always an enemy with you military types.' The Doctor couldn't keep a lid on his annoyance. 'If there isn't one in front of you, you find one behind you. If you can't find one, you invent one. And if you can't invent one, you find one among yourselves. It's such a simple equation, but it doesn't add up.'

'We are not mathematicians, Doctor. We are soldiers. We follow orders.'

'Well, I'm not a soldier and I don't recognise your orders. I'm not helping you find your wretched trigger. In fact, I mean to stop you

by any means at my disposal. I advise you not to stand in the way.' He adopted the Eighth Pose of Readiness taught by the Aikido Masters of Venus.

'Don't be a fool, Doctor,' said Kandula, seeming to be almost in tears. 'You can't fight all of us.'

'Oh, can't I? I will if I'm forced to,' he told the gigantic soldiers. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

Kandula stiffened at the challenge. 'Restrain him, but don't harm him,' he instructed the guards, 'too much.'

With a loud, trumpeting sound, the three Crei soldiers converged on the Doctor.

Kan backed away, certain that the Doctor's fate — and his last hope — was sealed. How had it come to this? He had somehow pulled himself back from certain doom — and now, disaster!

But it didn't go as he feared. First one guard then another went tumbling aside, propelled over the edge of the flatbed by their own momentum and the Doctor's combat skills. The third, enraged by the dishonouring of his fellows by one so tiny, lost all reason and charged with head held low and trunk flailing. The Doctor dodged nimbly aside — faster than any Crei could move — and tugged one sharpened tusk just enough to send the soldier off-balance. With a blast of dismay, the soldier followed his fellows onto the street.

And now the Doctor was holding a pistol in both tiny hands, plucked from the last guard's trunk-holster as he went by.

'Drive, Sergeant. You're going to take me to the TARDIS.'

'I cannot,' Kan protested automatically. 'I would rather die than betray the Crei.'

'Look at it this way... ' Before the guards could lever themselves back up onto the flatbed, the Doctor kicked expertly at the knee pedals and slid one hand into the trunk-space. The engine roared.

With a lurch, the flatbed moved fast back along the bridge. ‘Hold on!’

The Doctor drove with reckless abandon, careening through the streets of the ancient city. Kan was thrown from side to side with such force that even his armour couldn’t keep him upright. He rolled across the back of the flatbed like a pebble in a tin can, his already battered body sustaining yet more bruises.

‘You’ll never make it,’ he cried. ‘Your ship is guarded by the rest of the squadron!’

‘I’ll find a way past them.’

‘But you won’t have the element of surprise this time. The guards back there will have sounded the alarm by now.’

‘Haven’t you?’

Kan had no ready answer for that.

They leapt over an intersection and knocked down a series of relatively modern street signs with a succession of loud crashes.

Somehow, above the noise, Kan heard the Doctor cry, ‘Listen to me, Kandula. We can talk now without anyone listening in. I need to know where your loyalties truly lie. Now is the time to decide once and for all.

You can’t run forever!’

Kan knew that too. His desperate attempt had ended in potential disaster. ‘I’ve been a soldier all my life,’ he wailed. ‘But now I don’t want anyone else to die! What’s wrong with me?’

‘Nothing at all,’ said the Doctor. ‘You have to trust me. If you do that, I guarantee you that everything will work out.’

Kan wanted to believe him, even as his mind rebelled against itself. Why would he dream of trusting this flimsy-looking alien, with his

wispy hair and tiny nose? Perhaps it was the way he had defeated three Crei guards more easily than someone twice his size. Perhaps it was his knowledge of the city around them, and his obvious affection for it. Or perhaps it was something else, the feeling that somewhere, somehow, the Doctor had made many such decisions himself, and lived to give Kan the chance he needed right now...

Feebly, with his delicate trunk and tusks protected by his upraised legs, Kan nodded.

Instantly the flatbed's wild acceleration eased. The Doctor stepped away from the controls with his hands raised. He kicked the gun to where Kan lay shaking, wondering what was going to happen next.

'Pick it up,' the Doctor said. 'You're supposed to be bringing me in, remember? I'll never get to the TARDIS, otherwise.'

'Yes. I understand.'

His communicator was squawking; he could ignore it no longer. 'I have re-apprehended the alien,' he informed Commander Ezrehard, hoping the tremor wasn't as obvious in his speech as it seemed to his ears. 'The situation has been contained.'

'Situation? What situation? I gave you the simplest of tasks and you've turned it into a carnival!'

'I believe the alien does know the location of the Tipping Device.' The Doctor nodded encouragingly, and Kan's courage held. 'Meet me at Science Section HQ sir.'

'You'd better know what you're doing, Kandula. This is your last chance!'

Kan's trunk was trembling when the commander left the line. The flatbed wobbled as he took back the controls.

'Do you really know where the Device is?'

'I suspect I do,' the Doctor said. 'Let's go, shall we? We've got a

clock to start.'

A large contingent of Crei had gathered in the Old Town Square. The Doctor immediately recognised Commander Ezrehard by his air of puffed-up self-importance. His armour was the most ornate and therefore, perversely, the least functional. The contradiction irritated the Doctor, as so many things about the military mindset did. Who else would reward people for becoming worse at their job?

The massed Crei converged on the flatbed as Sergeant Kandula brought it to a halt. Powerful lamps illuminated the Old Town Hall, casting the city's best-known architecture in a surreal light. The two asymmetrical towers of the gothic Church of Our Lady Before Tyn dominated the far side of the square. The air was thick with the heavy scent of the Crei, a mixture of ozone from their machines and musk rising from their thick skins.

The Doctor let himself be shoved from the flatbed by Sergeant Kandula, who had fastened his arms behind his back before their arrival. The sergeant's trunk was stronger than it looked, and nearly sent him sprawling. He recovered and straightened himself with some dignity.

'I'd say good day to you, sir,' he said to the commander, 'only I've no idea what time it is outside this trap of yours.'

The commander was unflapped by the Doctor's attempt at levity. 'Are you a citizen of this planet?' he barked.

'I have been at times, yes.'

'Understand, then, that unless you immediately reveal to us the location of the Tipping Device, we will lay waste to this world's entire surface. This city will be the first of many thousands destroyed. Its fate rests solely in your hands.'

'Well, since you put it so reasonably...' He smiled without humour. 'This way.' He forced a path through the crowd of soldiers and around the side of the Old Town Hall to where the two complicated

faces of the Astronomical Clock overlooked the ancient paving stones. The ornate hands on the uppermost face were stopped one minute short of midnight.

‘What is this primitive mechanism?’ Narrowed eyes scanned the overlapping circles and symbols with no appreciation, the Doctor was sure, of art or science, except as means to an end. ‘Its function eludes me.’

‘It tells the time,’ said the Doctor, ‘which you’ve stopped. On the hour, every hour, figures emerge from those doors up the top there, under the little roof. This Device of yours will be on one of those figures.’

‘Guards, tear this structure to the ground!’

‘No, wait!’ The Doctor placed himself between the Crei hordes and the oldest clock on Earth. ‘Listen to me. Sergeant Kandula told me about your war. Isn’t there another way to resolve the situation without resorting to the Device?’

‘Your rhetoric is redundant. The decision has been made.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that — but at least spare the clock. You have the capacity to start time again. Why not let the thing you want appear of its own accord? You’re a reasonable being, commander. There’s no sense in tearing down something precious when it doesn’t actually stand in your way. That would be nothing but unconscionable vandalism.’

The commander thought for a moment, clearly not wanting to seem uncivilised. Behind him, Sergeant Kandula shifted nervously from his left to right pairs of legs.

‘Very well. For aiding us, I will grant you your wish.’

The Doctor didn’t hide his relief. ‘Thank you very much indeed.’

‘Yes, yes. Now move aside while the temporal fields are relaxed. We will extract the Device the moment it appears.’

The Crei turned their attention on the clock as a sudden wind whipped along the empty streets. With a series of rising whirrs and clunks, the ancient mechanism began to turn again.

The Doctor, glad to be out of the spotlight, edged to where Kandula was waiting for him.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he whispered, and Kandula nodded with a mixture of desperation and relief.

The clock wound towards the hour as he and Kandula, momentarily forgotten, hurried along an empty street. For the first time since he had been caught in the Crei’s temporal trap, the city seemed a vital thing, restored from the deathly grip that had clutched it tight.

In his mind’s eye, he imagined the skeleton of the main clock face tipping over its hourglass and pulling the rope that would open the door above. The clock wouldn’t chime, but figures would emerge nonetheless: a procession of saints, a flute-playing Turk, a Miser shaking his cane, and Vanity admiring himself in a mirror.

Quite a show for a device over a millennium old. The Doctor could only hope that he and Kandula would have enough time before Ezrehard realised the Tipping Device wasn’t actually there.

They turned left. Kandula’s feet thundered like those of a stampeding bull elephant. Ahead, the House of the Black Madonna came into view. Two guards protected the officers’ mess and its contents.

‘I’ll deal with them,’ said Kandula, unholstering his weapon and clenching it tightly in his trunk. With one precise shot, he cut the Doctor’s bonds. ‘You must escape at all costs.’

‘We’ll escape together,’ the Doctor promised him. The TARDIS key was already in his right hand.

The guards noticed them and trumpeted a challenge. Kandula ordered them to stand down, but they weren’t stupid. Weapons

flashed, Kandula's on a lower setting but the guards' set to wound or kill. The sergeant's armour flared. The Doctor danced as sparks scattered around his black leather shoes.

'Quickly, Doctor!' Kandula cried.

The Doctor leapt through an empty window frame into the cafe and ran to where the TARDIS stood, blue and patient, in its web of restraints. The key slid smoothly into the lock. The doors opened.

'Come on, Kandula!' the Doctor called over his shoulder as he hurried inside. The familiar white control room enfolded him. His fingers flew across switches and dials. Delicate instruments reached out to examine the partially deactivated temporal trap and, through the chink Ezrehard had created, prepared to turn it inside out.

The rate of gunfire was increasing outside. The alarm had clearly been raised. 'Kandula!' Realising that the sergeant hadn't followed him inside, the Doctor hurried to help him.

Too late. The sergeant was limping and bleeding through the joints of his now-inactive armour. Shots continued to strike him as he staggered into the safety of the TARDIS and collapsed on the floor. The door was barely large enough to admit him.

The Doctor lunged for the door control and took shelter behind the console. A few stray shots that made it through the closing gap were absorbed harmlessly by the control room's roundels. As soon as the door was shut, the Doctor gave the TARDIS its head.

Wheezing, groaning, the central column began to move. The bindings affixed to the outside were useless once the dematerialisation circuit was activated. Time and space twisted in complicated knots, and the real battle began.

Two very different machines clashed like titans, each attempting to thwart the other's will. Neither one backed down easily. A thousand years the conflict might have lasted, in self-contained pockets of the space-time vortex that were undetectable from the outside. The conflict expended energy on a scale barely imaginable.

But in the end, there could be only one victor.

The Crei ship, the source of the temporal trap, became entangled in its own web and Prague, damaged and invaded but still more or less intact, was returned to its proper place in the continuum.

The Doctor moved steadily around the TARDIS's console, checking that all was running smoothly in the wake of the battle. Even under the most ordinary of circumstances, he could never be too certain.

When he was confident that he had done everything in his power, he went to check on Kandula. The sergeant's breathing was slow and ragged around the edges, as though his lungs were filling with blood. His trunk lay flat and limp before him.

'Stand up, old chap,' the Doctor told him, pulling at one corner of the massive armour. 'If you'll just let me look at you —'

'No, Doctor.' The sergeant's voice was firm and his weight unmovable. 'I'm dying, and I'm not afraid of it, now I have done what needed to be done.' Bloodshot eyes swivelled to focus on the Doctor. 'It is done, isn't it?'

'Yes. By reversing the temporal field, I caught Commander Ezrehard in his own trap. Fitting, really. There's a small chance he might escape, but I'll take care of that possibility too, in time. We're going somewhere he'd never think of looking, and getting rid of that wretched trigger forever.' The Doctor stepped back and patted the outside of his coat. His fingers detected nothing untoward. 'Where exactly did you hide it, by the way?'

'Inside pocket,' Kandula wheezed. 'Left side.'

From there the Doctor produced a small, lead sphere that hadn't been in his possession before. 'Ah, yes. Thank goodness for that.'

'I'm sorry to involve you in this,' said the sergeant. 'It wasn't my intention.'

‘No. I see that now. You stole the Device — when Before the collision with Earth, I presume?’

‘Yes. And when its absence was discovered, I told the commander that the collision was responsible, thinking that he would declare the mission a failure right there. I never thought he’d be so persistent.’

‘That’s the trouble with the military mind,’ the Doctor said softly. ‘You can never underestimate its dogged devotion to duty, beyond all reasonable cost.’

‘I resolved to hide the Device somewhere it couldn’t be found.’ Kandula’s deathbed confession ground on, even as his breathing faltered. ‘It wasn’t easy. Ezrehard would tear the city to the ground to find it. I was becoming desperate. I feared that my complicity would soon be discovered. Fear got the better of me — and that was when I ran into you.’

Was it then you planted the Device on me?’

‘No, later, when you were in Science Section HQ. I wanted you to escape and take the Device far away, forever, but you didn’t understand... couldn’t have known what I wanted... didn’t seem to...’ He coughed, and bright red blood splattered the white floor. His thick legs twitched. ‘I betrayed... my people.’

‘You are a good soldier,’ the Doctor told him. ‘The very best kind. You did what you had to do in order to avert another monstrous catastrophe. That’s more important than victory, don’t you think?’

The great head nodded. Kandula’s eyes closed. The Doctor squatted next to him as the TARDIS strained on through the space-time vortex to its ultimate destination. He stroked the leathery skin until the sergeant’s heartbeat ceased and his final exhalation sighed into silence. Still he sat next to the fallen Crei, thinking about all he had lost in recent times, and how small a thread that amounted to in the cosmic skein.

Standing, he walked to the console and checked the course he had

programmed. Soon they would be arriving at their destination. And then... ?

He exhaled heavily through his proud nose. The time trap had snatched him while on a heading far from Earth. The little world that so vexed and fascinated him clearly wasn't done with him yet. Best not to fight it, perhaps, and see what it had in store for him next. Jo might have left him, but he had had other friends there, and would have more, if he gave fate a chance.

'Don't worry, old girl,' he said, patting the console's straining side. 'We'll be home soon.'

It was cold and dark at the long end of time. Few visitors came to see what remained of the universe on the brink of heat-death. Theoretically, there was supposed to be nothing: no survivors, no ruins, no last messages. Truth, however, was always more complicated than theory. Numerous advanced civilisations used it as a dumping ground for things that had no place in the universe. Time travellers frequently popped into being to deposit a dangerous item in the void, then depart as quickly as they had come, leaving the item to tumble through nothingness, never to be seen again.

A stock-take of the vacuum would have produced a long list of intriguing items, including several powered-down Daleks, a needle-thin battle cruiser bent into the shape of a pretzel, a sliver of crystal so cold it made the surrounding vacuum look positively balmy — and one dead soldier cradling a single atom that had once, long ago, been gold.

Short Trips: Snapshots

My favourite type of Doctor Who story is one that features ordinary people caught up in the adventure, and being changed by meeting the Doctor. To me, stories like this hark back to An Unearthly *Child* and Ian and Barbara - they represent exactly what it is that sets Doctor Who apart from other science fiction series. Therefore, when Ian Farrington gave me the opportunity to edit my own Short Trips, I decided that that would be the theme: we'd see snapshots of peoples' lives and see how they were changed - for better or for worse - by getting caught up in the Doctor's adventures.

When it came to choosing authors, I decided that I wanted to do what I felt the Short Trips range had achieved more than anything - mix established Who authors with writers who were new to Who, new to Big Finish and also, in some cases, previously unpublished. Therefore, I contacted some Short Trips regulars, such as Simon Guerrier and Ian Farrington; some of the people I'd worked with on The Centenarian (still my favourite of the Short Trips) such as Benjamin Adams and Steven Savile; writers who were new to Big Finish, such as TV-series writer Helen Raynor and playwright Gary Owen; and people like Colin Harvey - who had previously won a competition organised by SFX Magazine to find new writers - and Nigel Fairs, a fantastic writer I'd worked with on various Big Finish audio ranges.

And then one day, while randomly browsing MySpace (I work from home, I'm easily distracted), I found Brian Dooley. I'd never met him or anything, but I was a huge fan of his television series, The Smoking Room. It had been a programme about a bunch of people sitting in a room and talking. No big dramas, no explosions, no sudden deaths... Just real people talking in a very real way, and therefore being much funnier than most other sit-com characters. I decided to send him a message, just saying how much I'd enjoyed The Smoking Room... "Oh, and by the way, I don't suppose you happen to be a Doctor Who fan, do you? It's just I'm editing this short story collection..." Luckily for me, Brian was a big Doctor Who fan and he was very keen to be involved.

His story, The Glarn Strategy, is simply brilliant. It's about a small group of people working in an estate agents and suddenly finding themselves caught up in one of the Doctor's mad adventures. And they adjust to become part of it. They change for the better. They enjoy life just that little bit more because of it. It's such a funny story but also one that has something to say about the way we live our lives today. And it's got the Doctor and Romana being just so fantastic and wonderful.

It's a story that I think sums up exactly why *Doctor* Who is clearly the best thing ever made. And it's a story that's proof that sometimes skiving on the Internet is a good thing.

Joseph Lidster

The Glarn Strategy
Brian Dooley

An Adventure of Martin Stowe,
with the Fourth Doctor and Romana

He was the best estate agent in the area. He rocked, he was the dog's - all the usual commendations. No matter how much pressure Martin Stowe had lately been under, or how much anyone strove to undermine him, that was one thing he could cling to: he was brilliant at his job. If he focused on that one simple fact then he could get through the day. Work would be his salvation.

Or so he thought. When two oddball customers walked into his office that morning they brought a change even more drastic than the turmoil of the last few weeks.

Martin Stowe could tell what a customer was looking for as soon as he - or, as Martin very much preferred it, she - walked in. She might not agree with his original assessment. She might have her heart set on a garden flat in a Victorian conversion. But by the time Martin had finished with her she was in love with the third-floor maisonette in an ex-council block that he'd been trying to shift for more than a year - he liked to think she was a little bit in love with him too. She'd get the property for a price that suited both her and the seller. Everyone was happy. Martin was often even invited to both house-warming parties. Or the maisonette-warming in one instance, if you chose to be picky.

He was the best estate agent in the area and Jason McGee at Haversock Laing could kiss Martin's latest plentiful 'Sold' signs if he tried to claim otherwise. So when the crackpots sauntered in, the pair of them obviously as mad as you please, Martin thought he had them sussed in seconds. Okay, things had been getting a bit stressy lately. Tense. The whole team was affected. Sheila and Indira were like wild cats, hissing and spitting at each other over the tiniest thing, and Martin couldn't avoid being dragged into their rows. Despite normally regarding work the way an alcoholic does a bottle

of sherry, he had lately found himself pining for a break from it all. Things had become that stressful. But his powers had not been dimmed by all the upheaval. He still knew exactly which property the weirdos were after as soon as he clapped eyes on them.

The trick, he found, was to sort customers into types. Everyone likes to think they're such an individual but most people, Martin believed, were stricken with a herd mentality. Almost everyone conforms to one group or another. Work out which group someone belonged to - it was normally obvious from their clothes alone, although a quick chat helped narrow it down - and you had their tastes and lifestyle tapped. It was then just a question of leafing through the filing cabinet and bringing out the right property details.

That was how he always went about things. Until the cranks walked in. Martin was the first to spot them. Sheila twitched in her seat as soon as they passed her desk and Indira had made her way from the kitchen the moment she heard the door go - it wasn't just that they wanted the custom: any distraction from that other business was gratefully leapt upon - but Martin had caught the pair's eyes first by standing and waving as they came through the door and so they made a beeline for him.

Martin looked them up and down as they approached. Everything about *him* - the crazy hair, the pretentiously long scarf, the tatty coat - screamed out, 'Look how arty-farty I am!' Martin guessed he wrote novels - all of them unpublished. He'd met non-novelists before. They liked to corner him by the airing cupboard during a viewing and describe their rejected plots to him in bewildering detail. But, on further scrutiny, this bloke seemed worse: he looked like he wrote pretty. That was it! He was a poet, who probably wrote long turgid verse sagas based on Celtic myths - and always after several pints of home-brewed ale. Of course that was never going to pay the mortgage - or even for the home-brew kit - so he had to have a proper job too. Uni lecturer, Martin guessed, in something like pottery or fine art.

Yep, that was the man summed up: he lectured in the university's art department.

God knew what *she* was doing with him. She looked quite respectable at first. Bit of posh - and gorgeous with it. Long brown hair, great figure. The dress was a bit glam for daytime but it showed plenty of cleavage so Martin wasn't complaining. She had to be crackers, of course - she was with the poet. Martin would have put her down as a kept wife - she had the air of a woman untroubled by practicalities - but doubted the man earned enough to keep her. She probably worked at the uni too, as a secretary or something; maybe an artists' model. She was too fit to be a lecturer, at any rate. When he described her later to his mates, the best way to sum her up would be to say that he most *definitely* would.

Having got a good measure of the couple, Martin mentally ran through the available properties. They'd want somewhere they could restore. They were that type. Somewhere a bit countrified - definitely somewhere old. He knew the very place. Dove Cottage was a dilapidated old ruin that had been on the market for almost two years now. As the couple made their way from the door to his desk he tracked down Dove Cottage's file.

'You don't need to say anything,' Martin told the pair, laying the relevant details, facing them, upon his desk. 'This is what you're looking for, isn't it?'

The woman furrowed her brow. 'What is it?'

'It's a house, Romana,' said the man. 'You've seen houses before. Although, looking at it more closely, it's actually a cottage - and you've *definitely* seen one of those. Lovely old Amelia had one - Amelia Rumford? You went inside it and had sausage sandwiches!'

'Oh. I thought he was offering us the document. So the properties are stored in flat images, rather than taking up too much space on the shop floor? That's clever. I didn't think Earth technology was so sophisticated yet.'

Definitely a nudey model rather than a secretary. The woman was completely wacko.

'Psssst!' said the man, huddling closer to the woman, although he made no attempt to lower his voice. 'Not *yet.* Don't say *yet.* In terms of time travel, knowing about a *yet* is rather a giveaway - and we are here undercover.'

Martin revised his original assessment. These two were nothing to do with the university. They were straight from a mental ward. And ifthey weren't, then it was high time they were sectioned.

The man had straightened up and now gestured for the woman to deal with Martin.

'Hello,' she said.

'We're past *hellos,'* said the man. 'I know we didn't get one when we came in - this young chap was too keen to show off his sales patter - but Earth custom has it that once you've started a conversation to suddenly go back and drop in a *hello* looks odd. We don't want to look odd. Just get on with it now - never mind *hellos.'*

'To get straight to the point...' the woman said.

'Self-defeating that, I think,' the man cut in. 'To tell someone you're getting straight to the point isn't to get straight to the point at all - it's to put the point off by some way while you announce you're getting to it. We're wasting precious time, Romana, with all this getting to the point - the whole world is at stake. Perhaps the galaxy. Don't faff about with unnecessary preliminaries. Just get to the point!'

The woman turned to Martin and did so. 'Has anything at all strange happened here today?'

'Other than talking to you two?' Martin muttered.

'Well, of course other than talking to us two!' bellowed the man. Martin was sure he could see Indira smirking across the room. She was loving this. 'This is a house shop, isn't it? What's so strange about a man and his... his... his delectable wife -'

The woman raised an eyebrow at the description.

‘- walking into a house shop and wanting to look at houses? If you find that strange, chum, then I’d suggest you’re in the wrong job. No, I mean much stranger than looking at houses in a house shop. Much, much stranger. Odd messages? Electronic ones, that is

- texts, emails? I think we can ignore semaphore or carrier pigeons.’

‘Unless the bird was an automated replica,’ the woman pointed out.

‘Bit early for that. By, um -’ the man checked the clock on the wall ‘- by about thirty years. A few more species will need to lose their natural habitats before that becomes common practice.’

‘That’s an awful amount *of yets,* Doctor...’

‘I’m not sure where we stand regarding Aldis lamps,’ the man mused, ignoring her. ‘There’s an electrical component to those, of course, but... ‘

‘Not digital.’

‘Quite! As Romana says, not digital. Let’s not worry about any communication you’ve had via an Aldis lamp. So! Weird messages - have you had any? Goads, taunts? Stuff that eats away at the very heart of your psyche?’

Martin sat down. He hadn’t meant to, but he did. The man’s eyes were so intense as they stared upon him. And how did he know? He’d described *exactly* what had been happening these past few weeks. Something *had* been eating away at Martin’s soul.

Sheila and Indira drew near, clearly hoping the mysteries that had plagued them were finally about to be solved. The atmosphere in the room grew chill.

The strange man’s tone - the cold, deadly seriousness of it - told Martin that whatever had been gnawing at his very sense of self, keeping him awake at night for fear of what he might dream, filling

his daylight hours with worry and suspicion, had even darker and more terrifying motives than he ever could have suspected.

‘Yes,’ he told the man, plainly and simply. ‘Yes, strange things have happened.’

‘Then, don’t worry,’ said the man, ‘because I’m the Doctor. And I’m here to help you.’

Martin couldn’t quite remember when it had all started but he knew that the texts came first. They were all from numbers he didn’t recognise - he assumed they were from his competitors, maybe Jason McGee at Haversock Laing, or even disgruntled customers - although he couldn’t imagine anyone was unhappy with his services.

‘U r nothing,’ they tended to read. ‘U think u r something but u r not.’

It was kids’ stuff, really; playground insults. They unsettled him a bit, he supposed. No one likes to think they’ve made an enemy. He would sometimes text back: ‘Who is this?’ There was never any reply.

But the texts were easily dismissed as a minor irritant, nothing more. Of course he was something. He was the best estate agent in the area. It was when the emails started arriving that everything turned nasty.

For a start, there were names attached. These weren’t cowardly, anonymous insults any more. Someone had taken the trouble to setup not just one, not even a few, but hundreds of different email accounts. The names seemed perfectly innocent - Janet Harper, Keith Norris, Shreela Patel - and he opened each message expecting a customer enquiry.

At first they were mere continuations of the texts.

Dear Martin,
Know this: you are nothing. Love

Lily x

Martin,
You think you're something special but you're not.
;)
Cheers
Karl

You really rate yrself dontcha? Wanna know something?
I dont.
I dont rate you 1 bit
Mason xxxxxxxx

Martin went through all his files to see if the names corresponded with anyone he'd had dealings with. They didn't. He emailed back but, as with the texts, didn't receive any reply. And still the messages came. To begin with, the content didn't bother him as much as the sheer volume, which considerably interfered with the working day. That very quickly changed.

The first to upset him was from one T. Jones. He'd had a call from a Tom Jones only days before. It wasn't a name he was likely to forget. Martin had dithered about cracking the predictable 'Not *the* Tom Jones' gag, as it was one which could offend certain sensibilities; but if he didn't make it then he could just as well seem po-faced to many others. Martin prided himself on knowing how to handle his customers and had eventually judged from the man's dour manner that it was probably best not to inject a note of humour. It was a preliminary enquiry, sounding out all the local agents, and it seemed to go well. Martin assumed the bloke had since decided to place his property with him at Morgan Heggarty and was emailing now to ask what happened next.

He distractedly sang the chorus to *Delilah* as he opened the message.

'Dear Martin,' it read. 'All your life you have been haunted by the thought that you weren't enough of a man. You don't think your father ever loved you as much as he loved his other sons.' Martin stopped singing. Who *was* this? 'I think you were right. I don't believe he did. Yours sincerely, Thomas Jones.'

Martin barely had time to react when another email pinged into his inbox. This one was from an Otis Matherson.

‘Dear Martin, It has come to my attention that both your parents view you as a disappointment. You are the least loved of all their children because you have done least to make them proud. You didn’t win a place at Oxford like James. (Or should I say, “Dr James”?) You weren’t a great sportsman at school like Luke. (Oh, he filled the house with trophies!) You tried to be a charming jack-the-lad like Andrew, but you just don’t have it in you. (He could flunk as many exams as he liked, he was always going to be your mother’s favourite.) What makes you special? Nothing. You have to work every hour you can to make any kind of headway in the world. Your parents know that. They call you “the plodder” behind your back. So plod, plod, plod your way through the day, Martin. It won’t make any difference. Regards, O. Matherson.’

He was about to fire off a contemptuous reply when the phone on his desk rang. ‘Morgan Heggarty - Martin speaking.’

‘Plod, plod, plod, plod, plod.’

‘Who is this? *Who is this?!’*

The line went dead. He dialled 1471 but the number had been withheld.

‘Trouble?’ asked Sheila, looking up from her paperwork.

Martin thought she’d asked it a little too knowingly. Sheila was one of the fixtures at Morgan Heggarty. She’d worked there for most ofMartin’s lifetime, having arrived straight from school. She and Martin always used to get along fine. Until her divorce, she’d been a good laugh but the breakdown of her marriage had turned her bitter and she was taking it out on everyone. There was a sly delight whenever anyone else came a cropper. Could she be behind these messages? Had she grown that spiteful? He knew she couldn’t have made the call but that didn’t mean she hadn’t put someone else up to it. He told her to get on with her work, determined not to

give her the satisfaction of seeing that she'd riled him.

Another call came: 'Plod, plod, plod.'

He was ready to tackle Sheila about it. But he was sure she didn't know that Jim had been at Oxford. He never told anyone that. It wasn't a source of pride for him as it was with his parents - quite the opposite. It made him feel like he hadn't quite matched up so he preferred never to mention it. And how would she know Luke had been victor ludorum at every school sports day? He had never told her so. No, it *couldn't* be Sheila. She had looked over once more as he slammed down the receiver and this time his attitude softened.

'Wrong number, that's all. Some crank.'

'Oh, God - not you as well? I've been getting them for days now. I've been thinking it was Stuart - I wouldn't put anything past that man - but why would he want to have a go at you?'

Martin shrugged. 'I've never even met the bloke.'

'Count yourself lucky! No, it doesn't make sense. Stuart's got no issues with you - you were never married to him. It *was* your direct line that went, wasn't it?'

'Oh, yeah - not the general. There's been no mistake. It was meant for me, I know it was. You don't think it's someone at Haversock Laing, do you? I mean, if things carry on as they are doing, this'll be the third month in a row we've beaten them on sales.'

'Oh, come off it, Martin - we're two local estate agents, not rival Mafiosa gangs. Are you expecting to wake up with a lopped off 'For Sale' sign on your pillow? This isn't a business thing. Like you say, it's probably just some crank. We shouldn't work ourselves into such a state over it. I'm gonna have an Options - d'you want one?'

'Hm? Erm... yeah - a toffee one, please. And you're right - it's likely just some mentalist with time on their hands... Nothing more than that.' He knew it wasn't. As Sheila went off to the kitchen, Martin checked his inbox once more. There were six new messages. They

were all on the same theme, describing the current attitudes of his ex-girlfriends. The first five were a torrent of spite and wounded pride that were no more than the cliched and expected reactions of the jilted: cheap slurs on his endowment and sexual prowess that annoyed but didn't wound him. So what if his exes sat cackling with their friends about him now? He was the one who had ended each relationship: it was sour grapes on their part, nothing more. But the detail in the messages bothered him and the sixth was an entirely different matter.

'Laura lied. Whenever she told you that she loved you, she lied. All the time that she was with you she was still trying to get over Paul. You kept the loneliness at bay, that's all. You were someone to hold her when things became too much to bear, but in her heart she was never holding you. That aftershave she bought you for your last Christmas together was the same one that Paul used to wear. She missed the scent of him so much, even after four years with you. She tried to love you but she found it impossible. Nothing that you shared meant anything to her.'

It was from a Daniel Naylor. Who the hell was he? Martin hammered out an angry reply, telling 'Daniel Naylor' he knew nothing. *Nothing!* Of course Laura had loved him. *Hadn't* she?

'We've run out of toffee, so I did you a Turkish delight. You might have to mush the powder up against the side with your spoon - I don't think it all dissolved.' Sheila put the cup on Martin's desk and tapped his arm. 'Are you okay, son? You're as white as a sheet!'

'I could do with something stronger than hot chocolate, that's for sure. Sheila, I know this might make me sound paranoid, but... are you getting weird emails as well as the phonecalls?'

Sheila put her drink next to Martin's and sat on the edge of his desk.

'I am, as it goes, yes. Horrible, nasty, vindictive stuff Like I say, I just thought, "Oh, that's Stuart," and shrugged it off. Or *tried* to... What do some of yours say, lemme see...'

‘No!’ Sheila was already peering around at his screen, so Martin clicked to hide the window. ‘I’m sorry, but... ‘

‘It’s too personal?’ She nodded. ‘Same with mine. That’s why I can’t believe it’s some random nutter - or anyone at Haversock Laing. Whoever’s behind this business is too well informed. It’s disturbing me now.’

It was disturbing Martin too; it all cut far deeper than a silly prank call. His years with Laura were the only time in his life when Martin had felt valued and understood - when it hadn’t mattered how much money he made, or how many of his competitors he beat, but only how kind he’d been, how patient, how caring. Laura had loved the better part of him. It sometimes felt as though she alone ever knew that better part existed. If he were to believe that her feelings had not been sincere...

Sheila was toying with the spoon in her mug of hot chocolate. She asked if Martin found it odd that the calls only seemed to come when Indira was out of the office and the pair of them were alone. They were clearly dealing with someone who knew them well and Indira had been part of the team for two years now.

Martin considered this. It was true that Indira was ambitious. And Sheila had always insisted that she held a torch for Martin. Indira had told her as much when she first started and had been disappointed to hear that he had a girlfriend.

‘Hell hath no fury like Indira scorned?’ suggested Sheila.

‘But why wait all this time to take it out on me? And why would she want to have a go at *you?* What have you ever done to offend her?’

‘I don’t know. These aren’t the actions of a rational mind, that’s for sure. All our workloads are up with Peter being ill - perhaps she’s cracked?’

Martin thought it unlikely. ‘Indira doesn’t know half the stuff that crops up in the messages to me. It’s not like we’ve had many heart

to hearts.'

'I suppose.' Sheila chinked the spoon against the side of her mug for a while. 'Martin... you don't think we've got a ghost?'

'Er... no, Sheils. I really, *really* don't.'

'But all that weird gunk up the walls of the basement? I know the fella said it was a snail infestation - but we never found any snails. What if it was *ectoplasm?'*

'You watch too many shows on the inaptly named Living, Sheila. All those programmes about the dead...'

But she had spooked him and when the phone suddenly rang again, Martin let it ring.

'You should answer it,' said Sheila, despite having jumped at the sound. 'It might be a customer, after all. We can't let this sicko get to us, whoever it might be.'

It was the fear of who - of what - else it might be that made Martin wait another three rings before plucking up the receiver. 'Morgan Heggarty -how can I help you?'

'It could have been anyone,' came the voice. 'You just happened to be there. Laura needed not to be alone, that's all. As soon as she was strong enough, she saw you for what you are. And moved on.'

The line went dead. Martin held the receiver to his ear, loath to replace it in case it rang again. The ringing of Sheila's phone broke the silence.

She caught Martin's eye before she answered it. 'Morgan Heggarty - Sheila speaking.' Her face drained of colour. 'Does this give you some kind of perverted thrill? ... Is that why you ring us? I pity you, I really do, if this is the only way you can get your fun. Shall I tell you what colour knickers I'm wearing, will that get you off? ... Who is this? ... Answer me, damn you! *Answer me!'*

Both numbers were withheld. There was a sudden flurry of electronic pings as emails flooded both Sheila and Martin's inboxes. 'Delete them,' Sheila urged. 'Delete everything you get!' She yanked the wire of her phone from its socket. 'I'm not putting up with this!'

No sooner had she disconnected the phone than her mobile began to pulse and trill as it was hit by a tide of incoming messages. The vibrations forced it from the desk onto the floor, where it continued to ring and thrum across the carpet, like some pernicious mechanical bug. Martin switched of fhis own before it could do the same.

The door buzzed to alert them that someone had come in and Sheila let out a scream. It was Indira returning from a viewing.

'Whatever's been going on here?' she demanded, dumping her briefcase and rushing to comfort Sheila. 'Is this you, Martin? What have you said to her?'

'Oh, so *that's* your game, is it?' said Martin. 'You're making me out to be some kind of nutter so Peter's job'll be yours.'

'What are you on about?'

'You want to be branch manager- we all know that- and you know I'm serious competition. You're trying to freak me out, affect my performance. I don't believe you, Indira! I always knew you were ambitious but to exploit Peter's illness like this?'

'What!? All I'm concerned about is Peter's well-being. I haven't given a thought to his job!'

Sheila pulled away from Indira and bent to scoop up her now silent mobile.

'Funny how the phone hasn't rung since you came back into the office,' she said. 'How no emails have arrived. It's like I said, Martin - she's the one behind these messages. God, Indira, you're sick!'

'Messages?' said Indira. 'You mean the crank calls? You've been

getting them too?'

'Oh, nice try,' said Martin. 'Playing the victim too. But as Sheila says, it's strange how the calls and emails never come while you're here.'

Indira's phone rang. All three tensed.

'You'll want to answer that,' said Martin. 'I'm sure it's only from a customer. What are you up to, Indira? Trying to send us two barmy so that when Peter pops his clogs and his job comes free you'll be the only sane candidate? An OTT way to get promoted, don't you think?'

Sheila was disgusted. 'Poor Peter. He was only moved to the hospice last Friday!'

'Yes,' said Indira, 'and when did the weird calls start? Long before then. I'm not listening to this paranoid nonsense!' She snatched up the phone. 'Morgan Heggarty - how can I help you?' She flinched. 'Enough of this. Enough! I'm hanging up right now and I am calling the police!'

Martin and Sheila were unconvinced but then the room was immediately alive with electronic alerts as all three of them were bombarded with further messages.

'That's it,' said Indira. 'It's time the police dealt with this.'

'We don't need to drag those idiots into it,' said Martin. 'I can handle things.'

'Something to hide?' Indira picked up the receiver and dialled.

The police never came. Indira and Sheila registered complaint after complaint but it was as though their calls had been lost in the ether. No help of any sort came. The emails and phonecalls continued, if in less of a frenzy than they had that afternoon. Martin did his best to ignore them, to carry on with his work as normal, but the atmosphere of fear and mistrust persisted. Sheila began to prattle

on about gremlins and poltergeists and Indira barely spoke to either of them, stung by their accusations. Someone, somewhere was out to get him, Martin was sure of it. They were playing with his mind, driving him to madness. At times he even doubted if Sheila and Indira were receiving the weird messages and weren't bluffing to cover their own conspiracy against him. He felt as though he couldn't trust anyone.

Then the Doctor and Romana walked into the office and Martin knew, as soon as they asked about the messages, that everything was about to change. What he didn't know was if things were set to improve or become ever more unbearable.

'I see,' said the Doctor, once Martin had described the situation. 'And all the messages have been in the same spirit?'

'Yes,' said Indira. 'Cruel, spiteful stuff.'

'But nothing we can't handle,' insisted Martin.

'Speak for yourself,' said Sheila. 'This whole business is making me ill. I've hardly slept, my eczema is back... '

'Don't worry,' the Doctor told her. 'I'm here now.'

Martin bristled. He resented the implication that this Doctor was their saviour - as though they were unable to handle things alone. 'And who exactly *are* you? You don't look like the police.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor.

'Perhaps they're plain-clothes,' suggested Sheila. Martin gestured towards the Doctor's long scarf. Sheila took the hint. 'Maybe not.'

'We're not subject to any Earth authority,' said Romana. 'In fact, in this matter, we're acting entirely independently.'

'What are you on about?' scoffed Martin. "Earth authority"? What other kind is there?'

‘None that can tie me down,’ bragged the Doctor.

‘There’s the White Guardian,’ said Romana. She smiled politely at the others. ‘We were meant to be locating the fifth segment to the Key to Time -’ she said this gobbledegook phrase as naturally as if she’d been pointing out that they were due to stop off at her mother’s but the Doctor doesn’t like to have a job -’

‘It’s not a *job!* It’s a task, an errand...’

‘It’s a *job.* A very important one. The Doctor has problems with authority - it’s deep-seated insecurity, manifesting as arrogance - so he’s doing all in his power to avoid it.’

‘Anyway,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’d said ta-ra to Tara - ha ha! - and were plotting the next coordinates when I happened to go into hover mode above the Earth... ‘

‘In the early twenty-first century,’ Romana pointed out, ‘at a time when, as any historian knows, Earth was subject to an *exceptional* amount of alien invasions. Nestenes, Cybermen, Daleks...’

‘Don’t list them, Romana!’ The Doctor thrust his fingers into his ears. ‘I mightn’t have saved the Earth from all of them yet! You’ll cause untold damage to the web of time if you give me what amounts to a set of tip-offs.’

‘Hmmm. It’s a good job you avoided Earth history at the Academy - and failed the few modules you did sit - given how often you come back and save this soggy planet!’

‘Pfuh! “Failed”! A fail in theory is neither here nor there - what use are theories to anyone? I never fail my practicals and that’s what counts! I’m not going to fail these good people now.’

Martin stared at them incredulously. ‘You are both completely barking!’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, ‘just easing you in gently. Romana and I are, as you’d understand it, aliens. But entirely benevolent. Well, *entirely*

might be bending the truth. *For the most part* benevolent. I am prone to moods - it's my genius temperament. As I say, I was hovering above the Earth when I noticed there was a non-terrestrial power source at work in the British Isles - well, more specifically, this office.'

'You were spying on this office?' Sheila was horrified. 'Not the toilets?'

'No. Well. Your soap dispenser's almost empty - that showed up on the scan. Must remember to switch that setting off. And take my own soap with me if duty calls. But I thought I'd better land and take a look.'

Martin had heard enough. 'Are you really trying to suggest that you're some kind of alien, who -'

'Hear him out, Martin!' snapped Indira.

Martin was stunned into silence. She couldn't be taking this imbecile seriously?

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Where was I? Oh, yes! The abusive messages you've received, the written attacks, the barbs and hate and spite - it's all of alien origin. The sooner you accept that the sooner you can stop putting unnecessary obstacles like disbelief in my way and the sooner I can go about saving your planet.'

'We shouldn't have left K-9 in the TARDIS,' said Romana, before explaining to the others, 'He's our robot dog. He would have been able to confirm what the Doctor says.'

Martin shook his head. 'Your dog is a *robot?'*

'Funny,' said the Doctor, 'I would have expected you to be more impressed by the fact that he can talk. Ah, well. Yes, my dog is a robot.'

'Madness!'

‘Then how do we know about other planets,’ asked Romana, ‘like Tara?’

‘Tara! Doesn’t even sound like a planet - it’s the house in *Gone With The Wind.’* Martin caught Indira looking at him askance. ‘My mum made us watch it every Bank Holiday. And anyone could invent vaguely plausible names for a planet.’

‘Go on, then,’ challenged the Doctor.

‘Um... Zaxos, Hexonane, Quibblibob Five...’

‘Not bad guesses. Although there are only four planets in the

Quibblibob Sisterhood.’

‘So what planet are you two from?’ asked Sheila.

‘Gallifrey,’ the Doctor and Romana answered together.

‘Huh,’ said Martin, ‘that is so unlike a planet’s name that I’m almost tempted to believe you!’

‘I *do* believe you, Doctor,’ said Sheila. ‘On all counts. I believe you’re alien, I believe your lady friend is too. I believe your dog is a talking robot. Most of all, I believe whatever’s got it in for us is not of this world.’

‘Yeah, but, Sheils,’ said Martin, ‘you were the one who thought we had a ghost.’

‘And that’s not such foolish reasoning,’ said the Doctor. ‘She at least acknowledged that what’s happening here can’t be explained by current human understanding. That’s all your myths and folklore are - ghosts, angels, fairies - an imaginative attempt to plug a gap. But some people are too arrogant to admit to any gap in their knowledge. And they’re the ones who remain blind to the gravest threats because they just refuse to see them.’

That shut Martin up.

‘It knows too much,’ said Sheila. ‘Like it can see inside our heads.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘it can observe almost everything that comes out of your heads in the form of communication and then it’s just a question of piecing it all together to create an impression of what’s inside. What about you others - are you convinced yet?’ Indira nodded. ‘I’ve tried and tried to make sense of what’s happening here and no ordinary explanation’s sufficed. And... I don’t know. I just feel I can trust you.’

‘You can.’

Indira smiled, relieved. ‘So what do we do next?’

‘Next?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Oh, next I save the world and you all watch.’

‘That,’ says Martin, who was liking the Doctor less with every word that came out of his mouth, ‘remains to be seen. This is our planet. Tell us what the threat is, and we’ll protect it. I’ll protect it.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ said the Doctor, missing Martin’s challenging tone. ‘I think I’m beginning to suspect the motive behind all this.’

‘Only now?’ asked Romana. ‘I would have thought it was obvious.’ She turned to address the humans. ‘Has interpersonal tension increased in this office over the last few weeks?’

‘Has it!’ scoffed Sheila. ‘We’ve been at each other’s throats. Much more than usual.’

‘Ever since the text messages and emails started?’

Sheila nodded. ‘They made us suspect one another.’

‘I’m not going to suggest we’re the best of friends here,’ said Indira. ‘We’re colleagues. But there’s always been a basic level of trust between us.’ She eyed Sheila and Martin disapprovingly. ‘That seems to have evaporated over the past month or so.’

The Doctor nodded grimly. ‘You’re being used as a testing ground. Something intends to invade this planet and is monitoring how you respond to its methods.’

‘I told you so,’ said Indira.

‘No, you didn’t!’ said Martin. ‘When - and please back me up on this, Sheila - did you claim that the messages were coming from Mars?’

‘I said that they weren’t from *me!’*

‘And they wouldn’t be from Mars,’ said the Doctor. ‘Martians couldn’t text with those cumbersome claws.’

‘But why us?’ asked Sheila.

‘Random sampling. As with so many of life’s miseries, there’s no particular reason why it’s happening to you. So don’t let it affect you further by taking it personally.’

‘Doctor,’ said Martin, ‘if you’re to be believed, some alien nasties have singled this office out from the entire planet to use us for their experiments. It’s a bit hard *not* to take that personally!’

‘Then you’ll just have to try harder. We need all our wits about us.’

‘Okay. But how are they managing to access all our phones and email accounts?’

‘Ah, well, that’s an easy trick. Any fool could do it.’ The Doctor ferreted in his pockets. ‘I’m a genius, of course, so I’m hardly proving my point when I take this little gizmo -’ he’d extracted what looked like a particularly small mobile from his pocket ‘- and rap out a sequence like so!’

A shrill whine sounded as the Doctor tapped the device’s buttons. The others put their hands to their ears. The Doctor soon stopped tapping and the whine came to an end. The silence that followed

was quickly broken by a *ping!* from Martin's computer. He had a new email.

'Shall I check it?'

'Of course!'

Ping! and *ping!* Sheila and Indira had received messages. They rushed to their own computers to check them. Their mobiles buzzed along with Martin's as texts were also received. The messages all read:

'Happy times and places! Lots of love, the Doctor xxxxxxxxxxx'

'Hmf.' said Martin. 'That figures. My mum's always said you should never trust anyone who signs more than one kiss - they're after something.'

'Then your mother is a terrible old cynic who's probably denied herself lots of fun.'

Romana was at Sheila's side, reading the Doctor's email over her shoulder.

'Oh, marvellous work, Doctor. I'm sure everyone is suitably impressed. I'm also sure that "everyone" includes whoever has invaded the system. You've just let them know that you're here.'

'Ah. By signing my name, you mean? Well, it could be a message from the local GP - that's an Earth term for a medic, by the way, Romana.'

'Is it usual, or even ethical, for doctors to sign messages to their patients with love and a row of kisses?'

'If it isn't, it should be! You're worse than Martin's mum, Romana - such a stickler for petty propriety.'

'You're avoiding the real issue, Doctor. These creatures can assess the situation here in a moment. You've just used offworld

technology to access the communications system. They will know you're on to them. I wouldn't be at all surprised if they moved straight to the next stage of their plan.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor glumly. 'Well, I did say any fool could do it.'

There was yet another *ping!* from Martin's computer. He checked his inbox. 'Doctor,' he said, 'you've got a message.'

'I have? It's addressed to *me?'*

'Yep. From someone called "Yankom Gunslash".'

'They obviously no longer feel the need for anonymity,' said Romana, as the Doctor took Martin's place at his computer. 'Yankom - that's a Glarn title, isn't it?'

The Doctor nodded distractedly. He was reading the message. His face was ashen. Martin watched as all the Doctor's previous confidence drained from him. So much for all his extravagant claims of having come to save them. Martin had endured weeks of taunting from these creatures. The Doctor had crumbled after just one message.

Indira joined Romana. 'What's a Glarn?'

'Oh, they're only this galaxy's most skilled tacticians and the rulers of a vast interplanetary empire. They are huge intelligent molluscs - over six metres in length - and they have never developed weaponry. Their might lies in their powers of manipulation and propaganda.'

'Huh!' said Sheila. 'Sounds like my sister, Doreen. Not the propaganda bit - I doubt she'd even know how to spell that.'

'They're also immensely adaptable,' continued Romana. 'They provoke other species into wiping themselves out and then move onto their devastated planets, wholly unconcerned by any radiation or fallout.'

‘That’s Doreen’s approach to other people’s marriages. Not that divorce turns people radioactive... ‘

‘Hang on,’ said Indira, still processing what Romana had said. ‘Snails are molluscs, aren’t they? The walls of our basement were covered in slime trails but no snails were ever found...’

‘They must have sent a scout to reconnoitre the premises,’ reasoned Romana.

Sheila threw up into her waste-paper basket.

‘But how do the Glarn provoke a species to destroy itself?’ asked Martin. He was still half watching the Doctor, who now closed the message he’d been reading, shook himself back to some semblance of his former self-possession, and answered:

‘You’ve seen for yourself all the trouble the Glarn can cause - the doubt and mistrust and fear. You all reacted on a limited scale. Bickering increased, nervous tension levels rose... I’m guessing that you all to some extent withdrew from normal social behaviour. Am I right? Stopped emailing friends or forwarding jokey texts? You put aside any attempt at casual banter and restricted all communication to what is necessary for work - yes?’

Martin nodded.

‘The Glom will be aware of that. They’re monitoring all messages in and out of here. They know how you’re reacting to their taunts. But imagine what will happen when their operation goes global and nation turns against nation. And they will, once the Glarn get to work. They know exactly what to do now, following this trial run. Deliberate disinformation. Rumours of arsenals being amassed that don’t really exist. Lies about the nature of various cultures’ beliefs. Easy stuff for the Glarn - and sure to set sabres rattling among your quick to anger species.’

‘So,’ said Martin, ‘the Glarn are basically intergalactic [edited]?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Doctor, ‘that last bit wasn’t translated. Perhaps

it's currently thought to be vulgar - the TARDIS can be an awful old prude in certain time zones.'

'Troublemakers. They're intergalactic troublemakers?'

'Ah! I can guess the word she missed out. And it's exactly right! That's just what the Glarn are! And terribly good at it too.'

'If the Glarn see the Earth as a prime location,' said Romana, 'then, I assure you, they could take it with ease. Your only hope is the Doctor.'

'Then we're done for,' said Martin. 'I saw your face, Doctor, when you read that message from Gunslash. It got to you, didn't it? What did it say?' He moved towards his computer but the Doctor grabbed his arm.

'No! Please don't. It was in the same vein as the messages to all of you. Working away at hidden fears. I've allowed you your privacy. Please allow me mine.'

He stood and left the desk. But his previous proud posture had gone. His shoulders were rounded in defeat. The women looked to him in hope. Martin looked on with pity. The curly haired fool was no use to any of them. Martin would have to step in.

'It's a good job we don't need you, Doctor,' he said. 'Look at you! You haven't got the backbone to handle the goading. But I know exactly how to deal with these Glarn.'

'You do?' asked Romana, obviously impressed.

'Yes - salt. That's how I'd wipe out snails and slugs in my garden, it's how we'll obliterate the Glarn. We'll get onto the government, tell them to contact Russia, or whoever owns all the big salt mines, and get them to coat the whole planet with salt. As soon as the Glarn land they fizz up into mush! Problem solved. Well, apart from all the mess. Am I a genius or am I a genius?'

'The third option,' said the Doctor. 'You're clutching at straws.' 'Oh,

you think so, do you?' challenged Martin.

'I know so. The Glarn won't invade in person when they can do it all remotely. That's the beauty of the wireless office - you can do your job from the comfort of your own home.'

'Then why did they send a scout to check the place out?'

'Probably just fancied the trip. You could learn all you want to about Fuengirola by flicking through a brochure, doesn't mean you wouldn't still want to go there on holiday.'

'I wouldn't,' muttered Sheila. 'It's where I had my honeymoon. Once bitten...'

'And you're wrong about the Doctor,' Romana told Martin. 'You do need him. As much as it pains me to admit it, the whole universe does. Although I like to think that I'm quickly learning to be a more than adequate replacement when he retires. Which can't be far off. He isn't getting any younger...'

'Huh,' said Sheila, 'who is?'

'Well, the Baltramaje of Kute are, as it happens,' said the Doctor. 'And ignore Romana - unless she's paying me compliments. She just resents that, being young, she's still shamefully inexperienced. I'm in my prime and I'm not going to let you good people down. Or Martin here.'

Perhaps it was a joke to lighten the mood - Sheila and Indira certainly laughed - but Martin didn't appreciate it. He was determined to find out what had scared this Doctor so.

'The Glarn don't need to invade,' said the Doctor, 'because all they have to do is stoke up fear and you'll wipe yourselves out for them. That's all aggression is, deep down. It's fear. Fear that someone, or something, is better and more powerful than you.'

'It's true,' said Romana. 'The Doctor can be appallingly sarcastic if ever I correct him or offer information of my own.'

‘Romana, has no one ever told you that simply agreeing with a perceptive remark doesn’t make you appear perceptive?’

‘As he has just ably demonstrated.’

‘Pah! Every creature in the universe is aggressively guarding its DNA, ensuring that it survives through the ages. Running in fear from anything with longer claws or sharper teeth. Or better strategies.’

While the Doctor was distracted, showing off his greater knowledge, Martin took the opportunity to sidle back to his desk.

‘The Glarn tap into insecurities,’ said the Doctor, ‘and nibble away at them, provoking aggression. Of course, humans don’t just protect their own species. They jealously protect their country, their city, their family - themselves. The Glarn know that. They’re exploiting that.’

Martin searched through his trash folder. The message from Gunslash to the Doctor was there. He clicked to open it. He wasn’t prepared for what he read:

‘You were responsible for their deaths.’

There was nothing more. The Doctor had known exactly what it meant. Martin had seen how he’d reacted to it. That awful haunted expression. People were dead because of the Doctor. Martin knew they’d been too quick to trust the man. Checking that he was unobserved - the Doctor was expounding further on the Glarn’s methods, if only to make the same points in different ways - Martin typed a response.

‘Whose deaths? The Doctor.’ The previous row of kisses seemed inappropriate in context.

The reply was almost instantaneous. Martin had had the good sense to turn off the sound alert so no one noticed as it arrived in his inbox. He opened the message. It was a list. Name after name after

name, scrolling on and on, seemingly into infinity. A list of the dead. All of them dead because they met the Doctor. A few names leapt out at him, some of them strange and alien:

'Temmosus... Katarina... Bret Vyon... Sara Kingdom... Edward Waterfield... Toberman... Viner... Gemma Corwyn... Shura... Aggedor... Professor Clegg... Rogin... Ronson... Laurence Scarman... Skinsale...' The names continued to pour down the screen as, propelled by rage, Martin left his seat and seized the Doctor's shoulders.

'I knew we should never have trusted you!' He span the Doctor to face the others. 'This man's a killer!'

The Doctor's voice was hushed: 'You shouldn't have read that message. It was part of the Glarn's tactics. They want you all to lose faith in me.'

'Who *are* they, Doctor?' Martin demanded. 'All those names - all those people? How did you kill them?'

'I didn't. I just wasn't able to save them.' 'Will you be able to save us?' asked Sheila.

'Of course he won't,' said Martin. 'We'll have to save ourselves - and we *will.* We don't need aliens coming down here and saving our planets for us. First we contact the army...'

'Like we tried to contact the police?' asked Indira. 'The Doctor's told you, the Glarn have tapped into the phonelines. They can stop any communication out of here. Stop all this alpha-male rubbish, Martin, and hear the Doctor out!'

'That coward? What use is he? He's too scared to take decisive action.'

'Oh, Martin!' boomed the Doctor. 'You are wonderful!'

'Yeah, all right, pal - don't get sarky.'

‘Sarky? I’ve never been more sincere in my life. We will all admit to being scared of *some* things - Macra, Daleks... ‘

‘The terrible Taran Wood Beast!’

‘Really, Romana, you need to see more of the universe. There are far scarier things than that out there!’

‘You didn’t actually see it, Doctor.’ She shuddered.

‘Well, no - that’s true. But it’s our secret fears that can prove our undoing. The terrors we won’t acknowledge, not even to ourselves. They lurk at the back of our minds, dismantling our confidence and strength. But if we drag those things out from the darkness and face them for what they are then we can learn to arm ourselves against them. So thank you, Martin. You’ve made me admit to my real fear - that the help I claim to offer isn’t guaranteed. That lives might be lost in the fight against more visible enemies. You all know now that tackling the Glarn will be risky -and that takes the pressure off my shoulders. I don’t have to reassure you otherwise.’

‘And that’s a good thing?’ sputtered Martin.

‘Anything that helps the Doctor work at full power is a good thing,’ said Romana.

Sheila suddenly blurted out: ‘I’m scared that if Stuart knows I love him then he’ll take me for granted and stop loving me! There - that’s my greatest fear.’

‘I don’t see,’ said Martin, ‘how we’re going to save the world on the basis of knowing that!’

‘Well, those creepy Glarn can’t get at me now - can’t send me any more of their nasty messages. Everything they’ve sent’s been about me and Stu. “If you tell him you love him, he’ll run a mile.” “Say you’re lost without him and you’ll scare him off’ I’ve done what the Doctor said we should do - I’ve put my biggest fear out there - so there’s nothing else they can exploit. I love that man. This is Stuart, I’m talking about - not you, Doctor. Sorry. I’ve always been too

terrified to show it in case he beggared off on me. I know we've ended up divorced as a result, like - but I think that's what's been keeping him keen.'

Indira put her arm around Sheila. 'No, Sheils - *you've* kept him keen. Just *you.'*

Martin, regretting having snapped, put his arm around her other shoulder. 'You'll be okay, Sheils.'

'A-ha!' said the Doctor. 'The Glarn have underestimated you.

They've been too cynical - like your mother, Martin, with her mistrust of kisses. They've focused on humans' willingness to fight but they forgot one thing: how well you bond in adversity! Fear can cause aggression but it also stirs up sympathy! When another's fears are the same as our own - not being up to the job in hand, or worrying that we'll never be truly loved - we don't hit them. *We hug them!'* He looked at Romana, standing apart from the group. 'Or those of us who've spent enough time around you lovely humans do!' He threw his arms around the cuddling trio. 'We're going to beat the Glarn and *no one* is going to die in the process!'

'Martin,' said Romana, turning to face him, 'what's your biggest fear?'

'Tell me yours first.'

'I already have done - the terrible Taran Wood Beast'

'And we all know Martin's biggest fear,' said Indira. 'It's obvious. He's terrified he's not the hotshot he likes to think he is. Scared his big ideas about himself are just to comfort him from the truth. Isn't that so, Mart? You should drop the facade. We all know you're a softy underneath. Some ofus even quite like your soft side.'

'Are you a softy, Martin?' asked the Doctor. 'I'll let you into a secret - so am I!'

Martin laughed at the redundancy of the 'confession'; on the

evidence so far, the Doctor was the most sentimental person that Martin had ever met - and he greatly admired him for it

‘Okay, I admit it. I love this planet and I love the people on it. And, if there’s anything I can do to stop it, I’m not going to let some intergalactic slug wipe us all out.’

‘The slug angle is rather a red herring,’ said the Doctor, ‘if you’ll pardon the mixed metaphor. The Glarn are more like squid.’

Martin didn’t care. He was hatching a plan. ‘The Glarn think this planet is ripe for invasion on the basis of how this office has responded to their attack - yes? They’ve seen that we’ve become edgy and withdrawn and quick to respond in anger - yes? They’ve seen that we’ve cut ourselves off from our friends - yes?’

The Doctor grinned and nodded furiously. ‘Yes?’

‘So we respond differently. We reach out to everyone we know.

We shrug off the insults, act like we’re not bothered and... and...’

‘You have fun!’ said the Doctor, punching the air.

‘I’d have got there eventually,’ grumbled Martin.

‘Of course you would,’ said the Doctor. ‘So here’s what we’re going to do...’

The counter-attack had to come in the form of texts and emails, since they were what the Glarn were observing. The Doctor told the humans to find anything they had that would send out the message that they were happy and full of fun, and unconcerned by the Glarn’s attempts to rile them, and forward it to everyone they knew.

Sheila was already going through her folders.

‘Doctor, a lot of the stuff I’ve got here is quite blue. Mainly from our Doreen - she’s always been on the brassy side. Doesn’t seem right, somehow, saving the world with smut.’

‘Anything that might bring a smile to someone’s face, Sheila - anything at all - you should pass on!’

‘You do realise,’ said Romana, as Sheila merrily clicked away, ‘that humour is very often an act of aggression in itself?’

‘Oh, yes,’ beamed the Doctor, ‘and highly effective in crushing pomposity, opposing sanctimony, and blowing a powerful raspberry at anyone who takes themselves too seriously. The Glarn won’t cope.’

‘I can’t believe we’re doing this,’ said Martin, forwarding a collection of amusingly captioned risque snaps to everyone in his address book. ‘We’re saving the world with spam!’

‘Martin!’ blushed Indira. ‘That last one was pure filth - and you’ve sent it to all of your customers!’

‘So? I’d rather lose business than lose the planet.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Indira. ‘I’ll send it on to mine.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ boomed the Doctor. He had doodled a variety of cartoons and now rushed to the scanner. ‘When you’ve sent everything you’ve got you can load this lot up! How are you getting on, Romana?’

She looked up from the notepad that she’d been drafting a joke upon. ‘Quite well, I think. I’m rather pleased with this one: “What did the Algronostron say to the maintenance drone?”’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Doctor, ‘what did the Algronostron say to the maintenance drone?’

‘”Your gravitic panels are too wide”!’

Nobody laughed, and Romana’s self-satisfied smile soon faded.

‘I think perhaps the references are too obscure,’ said the Doctor,

treading gently around her obvious disappointment. ‘Humans won’t get it. This particular Time Lord didn’t get it - and I’ve been around a bit.’

‘Well, you see, the Algronostron has mistaken the Drone’s detection discs for...’

‘No, Romana. If a joke has to be explained then it wasn’t worth telling in the first place.’

The computers began to ping with new emails.

‘The Glarn?’ asked the Doctor.

‘No,’ answered Martin. ‘These are all from mates.’ He skimmed the most recent. ‘A few “LOL”s and smilies... Wavo wants to know why I’ve been ignoring him... Macca’s having a party on Saturday... ‘

‘This one’s from Stuart,’ said Sheila, ‘saying he’s touched that we’ve got to this stage - where we can share jokes, no acrimony...’

Indira was choked. ‘My dad has got back to me. After all these years... ‘

‘This one’s from Jim,’ said Martin, ‘my big bro. He’s a doctor, you know. Says I just lightened a particularly tough day at his surgery. I really should tell him how proud of him I am... He was always the one with the brains.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said the Doctor. ‘Has he ever helped to save a whole planet?’

He was fiddling with the small device he had used earlier and grinning broadly at the results it gave him. Romana read the tiny screen over his shoulder.

‘All Glarn activity in the area has ceased,’ she said, but not with the expected note of triumph. ‘And I never got to try out my joke on them.’

‘Probably just as well,’ said the Doctor. ‘They might have died laughing. As it is, this has been a bloodless war - and that’s always my favourite sort!’

The Doctor and Romana agreed to stay on for half an hour or so. Sheila made them all an Options. Over his drink, the Doctor regaled them all with tales of other planets he had saved. Martin had to hand it to him, the man was a marvel.

‘I don’t suppose you could stay even longer, Doctor - help us out with a few problem properties? If anyone could shift Dove Cottage, you can.’

‘Why would I want to sell an old wreck like that to some poor unsuspecting punter? *Although...* what would be my commission?’

‘You already have a job, Doctor,’ said Romana, draining her drink and rising. ‘The Key to Time, remember?’

‘Oh, don’t call it a job, Romana. I don’t have a job. I just do favours for people.’ He stood too. ‘Thank you for the delicious drink, Sheila. I might pop back and have another some day soon.’

‘You’d be welcome any time!’

The Doctor waved to the humans and then strode out of their lives. Romana smiled fondly after him. She really was quite beautiful when she dropped the ice maiden act, thoughtMartin. And he knew now that pining after Laura was pointless. He caught Romana at the door as she was about to leave.

‘Erm, Romana, before you go, I was wondering... could I maybe take your number?’

‘My number? Which number? My atomic mass?’

‘Your phone number. I thought, perhaps, I could call you some time... ‘

‘Oh, I don’t think so. You’d never reach me. We’re likely to be very

far from here in future. And also in the future in future. I hope you're not offended - I'm simply being practical.'

'And,' said Indira, who, annoyingly, had earwigged in, 'I think you've had enough trouble from extraterrestrial phone calls for a while, Mart - don't you?'

Romana offered her hand for Martin to shake. 'Goodbye.'

And then, without so much as a peck on the cheek, she was gone.

Sheila was on the phone as he passed her desk. He heard her say: 'Stuart, love, come back home... This time it's for good, I promise.'

He joined Indira in the kitchen, where she was rinsing all the used mugs.

'Oh, heck, Martin.' She sighed. 'What are we going to do about all our clients? We've sent them heaps of trivia and filth.'

'Who cares about them, Indi? Do you? Let them fret about putting down roots, getting a mortgage, worrying how secure they'll be fifty years from now. I can't be bothered with all that any more. The Doctor's right. It's not what life's about. *"Carpe diem,"* my brother, Jim, used to say. It's Latin - he was always the brainbox of the family.'

'I know what languague it is, Mart. I imagine most people do - and what it means: "Seize the day."'

'I always knew how it translated. But I don't think I ever understood what it meant. I do now - thanks to the Doctor. Let's carpe a bit of diem, shall we?'

'How d'you mean?'

'I know today's changed everything - I can feel it. My life won't ever be the same again. But it's a bit too early to decide what comes next. For now, let's just shut up shop and go to the pub!'

Short Trips: The Ghosts of Christmas

Editing The Ghosts *of Christmas* has proved to be one of the most pleasurable experiences of our creative partnership. We'd been pestering Big Finish for years for the chance to put together a Short Trips collection, and we'd all but given up hope. Then, out of the blue, Ian Farrington approached us to ask if we'd be interested in compiling the Christmas collection for 2007.

As confirmed Christmas junkies, Cav especially - he puts the decorations up on 1st December and reads A Christmas Carol every year - how could we say no? And it was this love of the Dickens classic that neatly suggested the loose theme for the collection, stories set in Christmases Past, Present and Yet To Come...

There's something quite heartbreaking about Dear Great Uncle Peter - a small boy, excited by Christmas so much that his tummy gets "fluttery and jumpy", and then the most horrible, monstrous thing happens that could ever happen to a five-year-old. Christmas Day comes and goes and he can't remember it, his memories of that 24 hours ripped from his mind. Terrifying.

It was this central premise that sold us utterly on Dear Great Uncle Peter. Neil captured so much of that build-up to Christmas Day itself from a little boy's point of view, when you think it will never come, that you might burst with expectation, even those final moments of tension sitting on the landing waiting to go downstairs and open the presents.

Not only that, Dear Great Uncle Peter has a beautifully rendered Fourth Doctor, commanding and indignant, magical and lovable, utterly mesmerising to the children around him - much as the character of the Doctor remains today in the hearts of the nation...

"He was a bit magic, I think. He was a bit strange, too, like the world got tingly around him. It felt like he could be your best friend and you knew you would be best friends forever, even though he didn't even stay for dinner." provides as good a thumbnail sketch

for the Doctor that either of us can bring to mind.

And then there's that last line, a line that at once makes you feel fluttery and jumpy, warm and fuzzy, and maybe even a little sad. Sentimental it might be, but if you can't have sentiment at Christmas, when can you?

Cavan Scott and Mark Wright

Dear Great Uncle Peter
Neil Corry

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,
with Leela

Dear Great Uncle Peter,

Mum says that it's good to write thank-you letters to people who have given you Christmas presents so this is NOT a thank-you letter because people who STEAL things are mean and those who steal Christmas are the meanest. And you're NOT my Great Uncle Peter at all and I don't even HAVE a Great Uncle Peter and you're really aliens from another planet. So there are lots of reasons this is NOT a thank-you letter. Anyway, I don't have your address and Mum says the Post Office won't deliver to other planets and then tells me not to talk about it any more.

And your spaceship was RUBBISH.

So this is really a STORY so I don't forget what happened with the Doctor and the nice Leela who Dad liked A LOT but Mum did not.

It's hard to think where to start but Dad says I should DIVE IN and we can work around it. He's typing this on his computer with two fingers and a thumb and has promised to put EVERYTHING in, and in BIG letters where I want them.

I will start with the day BEFORE Christmas. It didn't snow on our street but there was snow on TV. Huge piles of snow, and cars and lorries were stuck. It looked GREAT. You could make loads of snowmen and even a snow fortress like Superman's if you wanted. I was a bit sad that I wasn't one of the people stuck in the cars and lorries. Lucy, who is my sister and is three years older than me and likes skipping and make- up but does not like me, was being nice FOR ONCE and we were making Mum a big Christmas card. I was being careful with the Christmas tree and was being careful with Mum. I think she was FED UP and was being busy in the kitchen. So

that day I didn't ask if it was Christmas yet. I think I asked it a lot because Christmas was taking ages to come. And then I missed it because of YOU. But I did get it back, even if I got some memories of Roger Livesy's who lives down the road and has pet frogs and a skinhead. I remember eating a massive Christmas dinner with SPROUTS in it which are bluerk and I wish the aliens had taken them instead. Taking away all the sprouts in the world would have been a good Christmas present.

Then Mum made fried egg and microwave chips and let me have as much ketchup as I wanted. Lucy said Mum was being FRAZZLED and I shouldn't bother her. Lucy just likes bossing me because she is eight and a half. She can BOG OFF and her friends Samantha and Astrid can BOG OFF as well. They didn't have their Christmases stolen.

Then it was bedtime. I had a funny feeling in my tummy. It was all fluttery and jumpy. It took ages and ages to go to sleep. I wanted to wait for Father Christmas but Mum said only bad boys did that and they wouldn't get any presents. I don't know ifI'm bad or good because when I broke Lucy's china pony it made her cry and making people cry is a bad thing but I didn't mean it. YOU made me cry because when I woke up it was Christmas Day BUT IT WASN'T.

I sat on the top stair of the landing and waited and waited for Mum and Lucy to wake up. I can tell the time and it was NEARLY time to open the presents but I would be in BIG TROUBLE with Mum WI went downstairs too early. I knew what time would be the right time because Dad was coming to our house but would not bring Penny who Mum calls Bad Penny which has made Dad laugh. Dad was going to open presents too. I made him a rock with a motorbike sticker on it. He likes bikes and reads lots of magazines about them and had a big pile of them in Mum's bedroom until she kicked them and Dad moved out but they are friends now and things are okay. I think. I wish Dad had a motorbike, though. Mum says I would go on a motorbike over her dead body, which makes me a bit sad inside but I do not say anything.

ANYWAY. It is NOT Christmas Day but I think it IS. I am waiting for

everyone to wake up and then everyone does, but Lucy just pushes past me and goes downstairs and I think she'll be in BIG TROUBLE and I tell her but she just looks at me and calls me demented. She calls everything demented. And then I hear her go into the kitchen and make breakfast. This isn't right and then it's worse. Mum walks past me AS WELL and I can't believe it. Then she asks me what I'm doing sitting on the stairs and calls me Cheeky-Chops which is not my name because that is Alex.

I follow Mum downstairs and in the kitchen there's a HUGE pile of washing up which I know was not there when I went to bed because Mum had been cleaning all day. I remember no one seemed interested that it was Christmas Day and then I went into the front room and EVERYWHERE there were toys and things and a Wii, which I know I had been specially wishing for and had said to Dad whenever I saw him that I hoped Father Christmas would bring me one, so that would be at least every Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning since a long time. And then I cried. I don't like crying. Not like Becca Kazinsky in class, who cries EVERY day for something or other, like her tangerine in her lunch is squashed or her buttons won't do up. I saw that my and Lucy's card to Mum had been opened and was on the mantelpiece. At first Mum was worried I was crying and then I asked her who had opened all the presents and did Lucy give her the nice Christmas card early and where was Dad? Mum said we had opened them together and that that was all yesterday, and she called me Baby which I do not like either. And then I didn't understand ANYTHING and it was horrible and I will never EVER forget the feeling. It was the worst, much worse than when I slipped on the wall and banged my knees that had cool bruises for days. The fluttery and jumpy feeling came back but was much bigger and hurt a lot and I cried even more which made Mum cross, so I stopped crying and sat on the sofa and was quiet and was sad. Then Lucy was nice and brought me rice krispies with chocolate milk and asked me 'What's wrong?' and I said, 'When did Christmas happen?' and she looked at me funny and said, 'Yesterday.' I said that wasn't right because yesterday was the day BEFORE Christmas and then she called me demented and then the doorbell went.

Mum answered the door and it was the Doctor and Leela, although I

didn't know their names then. It was also lots of mums and some dads from down our street, which is very long and has all the houses joined up at the sides, and there were as well lots of people the same age as me, like David Winslow, Roger Livesy, Sarah Jenkins who are in my class, and other kids who are not in my class but still live on our street but go to a different school, like Peter Morani, Lyn Tyler and Paul and Paula Thomas who are twins and whose dad is a policeman and is massive. I go up to about his knees! And he has a big voice but it is not as good as the Doctor's who said, 'Good morning, Mrs Parlour,' which is what people say when they are being polite. I call my teacher Mrs Woodsworth in class but in the playground we call her Mrs Woodworm.

I will try my best to remember what the Doctor said after he said 'Good morning' but Dad says he can help. The Doctor was wearing this big coat and a hat and the biggest scarf I have ever seen, much bigger than my Liverpool scarf which is red and white and Dad says he will take me to a game ONE DAY when I am bigger. The Doctor's scarf was all sorts of different colours and Leela was wearing jeans Mum said later that 'she must have been greased into' and a big grey jumper that smelt funny. She was always VERY serious but not in the way like teachers are. She had very bright blue eyes and nice dark hair. My favourite thing about the Doctor was his teeth. He had loads of them and he liked showing them off, I think, because he smiled all the time, except when he saw the aliens who made him cross. He was even crosser when they shot him.

He said to Mum, 'I'm the Doctor and this is my friend, Leela,' and pointed to Leela who was holding the hands of Sarah Jenkins and Lyn Tyler, who was sucking her thumb AS ALWAYS, and Leela didn't look pleased about having to hold their hands AT ALL. David, Roger, Paul and Paula and Peter and other kids were crowded around the Doctor. He was a bit magic, I think. He was a bit strange, too, like the world got tingly around him. It felt like he could be your best friend and you knew you would be best friends for ever, even though he didn't even stay for dinner. He and Leela had more aliens to SORT OUT, I think.

What he said then was VERY important. He asked Mum, 'Does Alex here... ' and he pointed to me where I was hiding behind Mum's

legs because I am a bit shy with new people, Mum says. ‘Does he remember Christmas Day at all?’

And I shook my head ten times and Mum asked what on earth was all this about and it was far too early for this kind of nonsense but when she saw the looks on the other parents’ faces, which all looked serious and worried, Mum stopped GOING ON.

‘Of course he remembers Christmas,’ said Lucy from behind me in her whiney voice. She is a big know-all sometimes.

‘I don’t,’ I said in a quiet voice because I wasn’t sure if I was going to be in BIG TROUBLE for not remembering Christmas. I know I wouldn’t want to forget - and Dad has told me the word - deliberately, which means on purpose, which means you MEAN it. I had been waiting ages for it.

Then it was Leela who spoke: ‘Another child of this strange tribe has had his memories stolen, Doctor.’

‘Tribe?’ asked Mum, who didn’t seem pleased about the word AT ALL. And then everyone started talking and Paul and Paula started to cry and wanted to know just like me what had happened to Christmas and I joined in and in no time it was DEAD noisy outside our house. It was great when the Doctor raised his arms and shouted over everybody, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls!’

And everyone stopped, although Paul and Paula were still snivelling, which is my favourite word, and Paul had a big bogey on the end of his nose. He does great bogeys.

‘This really won’t get us anywhere now, will it?’ said the Doctor much more quietly. ‘Now, Mrs Parlour, these delightful children here,’ and he pointed at all of us and gave Paul a yellow spotty handkerchief which he still has and hasn’t washed, ‘are missing their memories of Christmas Day and, if you’ll trust me and my friend here, we hope to try to get them back. Do you trust us, Mrs Parlour?’

And all of us kids shouted, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ because you could tell

that the Doctor was a kid too, even though he was really tall and had a hat. And we were jumping about so much that I even forgot I couldn't remember Christmas. The Doctor made us THAT excited.

The mums and dads told us to stop and when we were quite quiet Leela showed me and Mum a mobile phone. 'Did your boy receive one of these machines yesterday?'

'His name is Alex, and, yes, yes, he did,' said Mum in her snooty voice, but I NEVER tell her I think that. But she CAN be very snooty with new people. 'I thought it was ridiculous for this Great Uncle Peter, obviously on Richard's side of the family -' that's Dad's side of the family to give a child a phone for a present. And it doesn't even work!'

'Not in the way you imagined,' said the Doctor, 'but it definitely did its job. Mrs Parlour, would you mind if I take a look at it?' And he did his BIG smile. 'I'm rather a marvel with machines.'

And then he stepped in our house and Mum let Leela in too, who had managed to get away from Sarah Jenkins and Lyn Tyler. I wasn't going to let the Doctor out of my sight, which is what Mum says when she thinks I'm going to be in BIG TROUBLE. We all went into the front room with the tree and the presents and the Wii that I must have played with because it was connected to the TV but I did not remember playing with it. That felt strange.

'I'm sorry, Doctor, or whatever your name is,' Mum said, 'but what has this got to do with my son?'

The Doctor stopped still and I ran into the back of his legs. When he turned round he said, 'You did hear me about the children's memories of Christmas being stolen not two minutes ago?'

'Yes, but -'

'Mrs Parlour, there are far too many buts in this universe. And Alex here -' he reached down for me and picked me up as if I was light as a feather, and his big pointy finger was touching the end of my nose '- has been deprived of his Christmas and I can't think of anything

more miserable and mean to happen to a five-year-old boy.'

'Five and a half,' I said.

'Sorry, five and a half. Anyway, I intend to find out who did it, why they did it and make sure they don't do it again.'

And he looked at Mum until she looked away. There was no arguing with the Doctor who could do the best staring competitions, I bet.

'But who would or could do such a thing?' she asked after a minute. 'Off the top of my head?' he said, scratching his curly hair. I put his hat on. It was too big and went over my eyes. 'About 117 different species from 91 different planets in three different galaxies.'

Before Mum could say anything else, Lucy came in with a mobile phone and asked in her sickly girly voice, 'Is this what you're looking for?'

'Do not trust this child, Doctor,' said Leela. 'Her voice cannot disguise that she has the eyes of a Horda.'

'Of a what?' shouted Mum.

'Leela, Leela,' said the Doctor, putting me down and taking back his hat. 'You are not helping. Why I decided to show you Christmas, I'll never know.'

'Because I found the socks that Madame Nostradamus knitted you for this festival of Christmas.'

'Ah, yes. Those.'

He took the mobile phone from Lucy which wasn't really a mobile phone but a brain sucker-outer I know NOW. Lucy was frowning at Leela, who was frowning right back and was much better at it. Then the Doctor went into his coat pocket and brought out something that looked like lots of big, clear Lego bricks all stuck together and had lots of coloured lights flashing inside them. Everyone was waiting for him to say something. It seemed to take forever.

‘Hmm,’ he said at last.

‘Hmm, what?’ asked Mum and Leela at the same time.

This is when Dad came in. No one had said he could come round or anything but Lucy and me were pleased to see him. I think Mum was too. Who are you?’ he asked the Doctor and Leela so I told Dad what had happened.

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Mum and Dad like using that word a lot.

‘Yes, it is, isn’t it?’ said the Doctor and he was smiling. I don’t think he was listening very much as he was still watching the flashing-light Lego thing.

‘It’s true, Dad,’ I said and hugged his leg. ‘I can’t remember Christmas.’

And then the Doctor said to Leela in a strange half-whispering type voice, ‘I can’t quite get a fix on the diastellic receiver, although I know it’s around here somewhere.’ You can tell Dad is helping write this. ‘There must be one more of these wretched things in the area we haven’t found.’ And then he MARCHED out of the front room and onto our street. Leela followed first, then me, then Lucy, then Dad and then Mum.

Outside our house all the kids and mums and dads were waiting. Then the Doctor asked if there were any other kids in the street about the same age and no one could think of anyone until Peter Morani said about Carl Wilton and that his family always goes away at Christmas to his aunt’s in Venezuela. I don’t think the Venezuela bit is true because Peter is always GOING ON about Venezuela BUT it is true that Carl’s family had gone away this Christmas which Lucy said is demented, but she thinks football is demented so I don’t know if going away at Christmas is bad or not. ANYWAY. The Doctor broke into Carl’s house! As soon as he found out where Carl lived the Doctor ran away, shouting, ‘Come on, Leela!’

But everyone else followed too. It was great! There were loads of us

and we all saw the Doctor point a big shiny pen which went 'Brzzzzzz' at Carl's front door then the door opened and he went inside and then the burglar alarm went off and it was SO LOUD. Everyone put their hands on their ears and you couldn't hear anything but the siren and it was dead early and lots of curtains of other houses on our street were being opened and people could see us all outside Carl Wilton's house. And then I saw the Doctor point his pen-thing at a box on the wall and the alarm stopped LIKE THAT and it was the best quietness ever.

It was now that I saw I was still in my pyjamas and slippers and it was still dark and I was cold so Dad put his black leather jacket on me. It was dead heavy but really warm so that was okay. We saw lights go on in Carl's house and then the Doctor and Leela came back out with a Christmas present. It looked really bad when the Doctor unwrapped it in front of everybody bemuse it was Carl's, I think, but it was a mobile- phone-brain-sucker-outer, and if Carl had opened it he would have forgotten about Christmas Day too.

The Doctor pointed his flashing light Lego thing at it and shouted, 'A- ha!' which was when the police car turned up going 'BWOO-OUP!' which is what police cars do if they don't want to do the full WEE- OOUW! WOO! WOO!' siren but want to let people know that the police are watching you RIGHT NOW just in case you're being a criminal.

The Doctor looked worried and said REALLY quickly, 'Everyone! I think I know where I can find the people who stole your children's memories but it would be a good idea if the lovely policemen in that car didn't get involved. You all know something very strange has happened and I'm sure you're all very bemused and probably very worried about it. But I promise you, if those gentlemen get involved, your children will never, ever remember Christmas Day. You do want me to put that right, don't you, hmmm?'

And EVERYONE believed him. Afterwards Mum said he could have been the one to blame for Christmas being stolen in the first place but right then EVERYONE believed in the Doctor. He was magic, as magic as Christmas.

Then he did another big smile, told Leela to ‘get a move on’ and they went back inside Carl’s house.

Everyone seemed to know just what to do when the policemen stepped out of the car. The parents began shouting, some of us kids were crying, and Paul AND Paula had big bogeys on the ends of their noses because they were crying the most. It was almost as noisy as Carl’s house alarm going off.

Then Dad scooped me up became I was wearing his big jacket and said, ‘Do you want to see where the Doctor and the nice lady went?’ And I nodded my head ten times so, with everything that was going on, we sneaked into Carl’s house and no one saw us! Not even Mum who always keeps a CLOSE EYE on me. The fluttery and jumpy feeling was back but this time it felt GREAT, although afterwards Dad got into BIG TROUBLE with Mum for sneaking off.

At the back of Carl’s house is a big field and there is a proper road to it but Dad and I walked through the house just like Leela and the Doctor. It was weird. I’d never been in Carl’s house before and don’t really know him. Dad had to climb a fence at the end of their garden at the back of the house and lift me over it which was great because I like being tall like Dad. We could see the Doctor and Leela running towards a small hill in the middle of the field. I didn’t remember a hill being there before, but thought it might be like not remembering Christmas Day. This was WRONG.

The Doctor and Leela were at the hill that was a bit taller than the Doctor and about the same wide, so Dad says. We heard the Doctor say, ‘All right, you can show yourselves now!’ which is a very strange thing to say to a hill. When the hill didn’t answer him back, the Doctor fetched his big pen and made the ‘Brzzzzz’ noise at the hill and then the hill vanished and there was a SPACESHIP instead of a hill.

But it was a RUBBISH spaceship, not like the ones on telly that go WHOOSH and are massive and have loads of people in them. It was all rusty and just didn’t look nice and was very, very small and wouldn’t fit even me.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor when he saw Dad and me behind him. No one said anything and Dad just had his mouth open and I thought his chin was going to fall off but it didn’t.

‘Dad!’ I said, because all of a sudden I couldn’t see because his jacket had gone over my face. Dad put me down and the jacket fell off me. Being a bit cold didn’t seem important any more. Then Dad put me behind his legs but I said, ‘That’s not fair! You can see!’ So I grabbed his leg and wouldn’t budge and then there was this big ‘POP! FZZZZT! WHSSSSH! WHSSSHTTP noise and suddenly everyone could see the ALIENS. They were rubbish, too, and there were only two of them. If I was an alien I’d be a big horrible monster, and definitely would not be a grey squidgy big centipede thing with no clothes on but wearing only pink see-through sunglasses they might think looked cool but were even more rubbish than they were.

But they were aliens and I saw them!

They made this horrible noise when they spoke, like this: ‘Squeeeee!

Squeeee! Squee! Squee! Squeeeeeeeeeee!’ but really fast and the Doctor and Leela could understand them.

‘Yes, I’m sorry about your chameleon circuit,’ said the Doctor after one of them had squeed A LOT. ‘I have terrible trouble with my own, but I just wanted to wish you a happy new year.’

There was more squeeing. It really GOT ON MY NERVES.

‘I was wondering when you would get round to asking what we were doing. You see, neither my little friend here -’ and he pointed to me nor any of his young associates can remember yesterday at all, and it really was rather a special day.’

There was more squeeing and I think one of them was laughing too. ‘You think stealing children’s memories is funny?’ said the Doctor. He was CROSS.

‘We should gut these heartless worms where they stand, Doctor,’

said Leela who had suddenly found a knife in her boot.

‘Put the knife away, Leela. Alex will get scared.’

I only got scared when one of the aliens pulled out an orange-and-blue space gun that was as big as it was and then FZ-ZT! It shot the Doctor and he fell down, and the spaceship went ‘SSSILIT! SSSSH! TZZZZZ! POP!’ and the aliens disappeared and their spaceship started to rumble.

But the Doctor WASN’T dead! Hooray! After not even a minute he sat up rubbing his head and said, ‘Nerve dislocater beam? How rude!’ And then he looked right at me with his big eyes and said, ‘It’s time to show them we mean business, Alex. Christmas is not to be meddled with.’ And I nodded my head ten times.

‘Doctor,’ said Leela, ‘I think these cowardly creatures are trying to leave in their metal box.’

The Doctor didn’t answer. He stood up, did things to his big pen which OBVIOUSLY was not a pen and pointed it at the spaceship.

‘Cover your ears!’ he ordered, and then there was this really screechy noise, much worse than the squeeing aliens. Today was turning into a VERY loud day.

It seemed like a long time before anything happened because it was hard to keep your eyes open and listen at the same time because of the horrible pen noise. Then it stopped and everyone started breathing again. Then there was a tinkle, then a crash, then a plink, and then a thud. Then the rubbish little spaceship fell in on itself! The Doctor smiled at me, then frowned: ‘Ala. I do hope I’ve not damaged the diastellic crystal.’

Then there was the ‘POP! FZZZZT! WHSSSSH! WHSSSIIITT noise but much quieter this time and the aliens squirmed their way out of the mess of their spaceship.

‘Squeeee! Squee! Squee?’ said one of them who had lost his sunglasses.

‘No, I won’t come in with you on your plans to sell these children’s memories. What kind of Time Lord do you think I am?’

‘Squee?! Squee! Squee!’ said the other one. ‘No, not even with a fifty per cent cut.’

All this time the squeeing aliens were wriggling out of what was left of their spaceship, which now just looked like a big pile of junk. Suddenly they were free and with a loud ‘Squee!’ they ran off?

‘Leela! After them!’ shouted the Doctor but she was already chasing the aliens across the park at the back of our street. ‘You too, Mr Parlour. You’ll be helping to capture two intergalactic criminals wanted in seven systems.’

Dad looked at the Doctor then back at me, then raced off after Leela. The aliens were tiny but went dead fast over the field. I don’t think Dad likes running.

Then me and the Doctor went over to what was left of the alien’s rubbish spaceship and the Doctor started picking bits up and throwing them away, muttering something to himself about terrible workmanship.

And then he went A-ha!’ and in his hand he had this glittery orange and see-through stone. He looked at me and showed off all his huge teeth again. I was jealous. I’ve still got all of my baby teeth.

‘Is that the dia... thing crystal?’

‘Yes, Alex, I do believe it is,’ The Doctor nodded and pointed his magic pen at the orange sparkly stone and then...

POP!

I was waiting with Lucy at the top of the stairs and she was more excited than I was that it was Christmas. And then Mum appeared and she was sleepy and smiley and she carried me downstairs giving me lots of kisses which was all right FOR ONCE and we went

into the front room which was like more magic than I ever thought I'd ever see. There was boxes and boxes and boxes and it was so exciting and the tree was even bigger than I remember and there was so much excitement and then the doorbell went and I jumped up in surprise, then remembered that Dad was coming for Christmas Day too and Mum was being pleased to see him and everyone was being dead nice to each other...

I fell on my bum on the cold ground. Everything had come back in a BIG rush and I didn't know where I was for a second, but the hard field helped me remember about the aliens and the Doctor and Leela and Dad. The Doctor looked at me very SERIOUSLY and asked me if I could remember Christmas Day and I really, really could so nodded my head ten times. Then Leela and Dad came back and each had one of the squeeing aliens in an outstretched hand, only the aliens weren't squeeing, they were hissing because Leela and Dad held them very tightly so they did not escape. Dad did not look pleased holding the slimy creature but

Leela looked like she had won the World Cup.

'I have captured the treacherous worms. They could not outrun a warrior of the Sevateem. And Mr Parlour was valiant in his attempts to keep up with me.'

And she smiled at Dad, who was puffing and panting and pulling a funny face at his alien.

'Good work,' said the Doctor, who pulled out two plastic bags from his pockets and put them over the aliens. I was shocked! Mum says you can't play with plastic bags because they're DANGEROUS and you can hurt yourself- and this made me think ofMum and she would be cross that we had gone after the Doctor and Leela.

But I didn't want anything bad to happen to the aliens even though they had been HORRIBLE. The Doctor looked right at me and, with the aliens fighting in the plastic bags, squeeing their heads off AS USUAL, he knelt down and squeezed my nose and smiled.

It's all right,' he said. 'They'll be perfectly safe in the bags. They

don’t breathe like we do.’ Which made me think very hard, but I asked the Doctor to promise anyway and he said he SOLEMNLY swore that the aliens would come to no harm and so I believed him.

And then the Doctor said they had to go now. He gave me a little wave and a big smile and he and Leela walked away. I wanted to follow them but Dad held me back and said quietly that we should let them go.

Even though you did the meanest thing I can think of, Great Uncle Peter, all my friends I told agreed that alien monsters from other planets should have nice Christmases too. After all, everyone got their memories back and no one was hurt, even if I do remember eating more sprouts than I’d like.

It wasn’t right what you did but you gave me the best Christmas present ever: an adventure with the Doctor!

Short Trips: Defining Patterns

A lot of Short *Trips* writers come to the range via traditional routes. They've already written Doctor Who fiction for other series, or are known to the editors, or have contacted Big Finish offering their services.

And then sometimes editors approach people out of the blue. In the past, I've asked numerous big-name novelists and TV writers to work on Short Trips, for example. Many were too busy or not interested (or too expensive!), but I was always on the lookout for new people who could bring something different to the range. (My biggest regrets from my time editing Short Trips books? Getting close, but not close enough, to persuading Darin Henry, Christopher Fowler, Mark Billingham and Peter Tabern to write for us.)

It didn't even have to be writers of fiction; just interesting writing. I first came across Mat Coward's name when I read his excellent Pocket Essential guide to classic BBC radio comedy. It's a history of series such as The Goon Show, Hancock's Half Hour and Round the Home, and is full of wonderful turns of phrase and light, easy-to-read prose. I was already thinking of getting in touch with him when, doing some research online, I found that he also had a great short-story pedigree.

Contacting him via the lovely people at Pocket Essentials, I asked Mat if he'd be interested in writing for Short Trips. I also cheekily suggested an idea. 'Wouldn't it be fun to put the Doctor into that world of BBC radio and the Paris Theatre and Hancock's Half Hour?' I said in my opening email on 29 September 2006.

Mat replied later that day, saying, 'Talk about pressing the right buttons! The idea of the TARDIS materialising in the green room at the Paris, in the presence of someone like Kenneth Williams ("Ooh, Doctor-your box is much bigger inside than outside!"), is irresistible.' He then went away and worked on an outline, which he sent across on 21 October. And it was a joy from start to finish. Post-war London... the Paris Theatre... a radio comedy called

Anyway, As I Say... rich, lively characters... a local pub where all the comedy glitterati hang out... intriguing aliens... and, at the heart of it all, a clever plot that tied everything together brilliantly.

Losing the Audience is a wonderful read. Its setting and tone are so powerful, and the story inhabits that world perfectly. There's also something very pleasing about a Doctor Who story about BBC radio comedy in the 1950s - a great combination of two joyous British institutions that were both born in that optimistic, post-war era.

The only major change to Mat's first draft of the story was that we tweaked the ending. Originally, the Doctor and Susan deliberately steered the TARDIS back to 1963, in readiness for their first television story. However, as we all know, the Doctor had no idea where each jaunt would take him - hence a gag to explain how they get back!

Ian Farrington

Losing the Audience
Mat Coward

An adventure of the First Doctor,
with Susan

This was idiotic, and he knew he looked like a fool or worse, scurrying through the autumn shadows. But, all the same, there was something about the whole business that rang a bell up and down his spine. So Max carried on following the woman through the unlit alleys of the West End. He'd chosen her because he guessed from her awkward posture and her half-hearted smile that she'd be walking alone from the theatre, to her bus or Tube or tiny flat. She wasn't the first one he'd followed, though she was the easiest to keep in view, despite the misty drizzle, with her old-fashioned feather hat sticking up like a periscope. Nothing had happened to any of the others, male or female, and probably nothing would happen to this one. Still, he followed.

It was cold and getting colder, and Max was suddenly aware that he was in his late thirties, not his early twenties any more, and that this was all based on a feeling which he couldn't even identify to himself, let alone tell anyone about. Just a feeling that these events - if they were events, and not merely tricks of his mind, cousins to the nightmares that woke him three nights out of four- were in some way related to his war work.

The feather-hatted woman was gaining a good lead over Max, who was hampered by ignorance of her route, and by his need for discretion. In a minute she'd disappear round one too many corners and he'd have lost her. The others were waiting for him at the Captain's Cabin, where they always gathered after the recordings. He could picture them at their table at the back, gusts of laughter periodically blowing holes in the surrounding curtain of cigarette smoke to reveal his 'tight little unit', reinforcing their friendships through the traditional methods of alcohol and mutual insult.

They all thought he was phoning his bookie. Except Maxine; he

wasn't sure what she thought about him any more, except that whatever it was it made her sad and worried.

And now they were crossing a bomb site, and his shoes were leaking. *Time to pack it in.*

But even as his feet abandoned the pursuit, his eyes caught a flicker of movement up ahead, ten yards to the right of the feather hat, and closing in on it fast. Weird-looking bloke too, from what Max could see of his outline and his peculiar way of moving. She hadn't seen him coming, that was for sure.

Max's heart was beating a rhythm he hadn't heard for over a decade, and it got louder as the woman suddenly disappeared. She'd obviously taken a turning to the left, invisible from Max's distance. He sprinted after her, but as he turned the corner into a Victorian garden square he immediately realised he'd made an embarrassing mistake: the feather hat and the peculiar man were standing in the middle of the opening, locked together in a passionate, trembling embrace. They were doing what the lads in Max's wartime outfit had called 'the blackout waltz'.

He ducked out of sight, and caught his breath, his hands on his knees. Idiot! They weren't hunter and prey - they were just lovers. He chuckled at his own stupidity: 'The secret war made you paranoid, old son,' he told himself.

Even so, as he trudged his way back towards the inviting, beery fug of the Captain's Cabin, he still couldn't quite shake that feeling: that something had followed him home from the war.

'Yes, yes,' said the Doctor. 'I think that's it. That's surely it. Quite probably.' He wriggled out from under the main console, clutching a spaghetti mess of purple wire in one hand and a transformer in the other. Straightening himself, he muttered, 'Let's find out, shall we?'

'Grandfather?' Susan had returned to the TARDIS, after passing a mildly diverting half hour exploring the Totter's Lane junkyard in which their ship was concealed, just in time to see the Doctor

threading the stripped end of the purple wire through an aqua-spanner, and preparing to plug the spanner into the transformer. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Not now, child. Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘Grandfather, are you sure that’s safe?’

Irritation crinkled the old man’s brow. ‘This is my ship! When the time comes that I need advice from foolish girls on how to run it, you may take me into deep space and push me out of a porthole. Until then, kindly be quiet.’

Susan was careful to keep her sigh silent. She braced herself against the wall of the control room, and awaited the inevitable. Her grandfather’s unfamiliarity with the old ship’s workings frustrated him, she knew; and she also knew that his usual response to frustration was reckless experimentation.

‘There,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think that’s fixed it, my dear.’ Two seconds later, a flash of blue-green light filled the room, and the floor rocked under their feet.

‘Are you all right, Grandfather?’

‘How curious,’ was the Doctor’s only reply. ‘I wonder why that happened.’

The crowd had been thinner again tonight, Max reckoned - unless that was just his imagination tormenting him. Either way, the woman in the feather hat wasn’t there, the one he’d followed after the previous week’s recording, he was sure of that: he’d had a good look for her. It seemed to him there were familiar faces missing from the studio audience every week these days.

After tonight’s show, he’d told Maxine and the others that he’d left his cigarette lighter in the green room, that they should get him a pint in and he’d catch them up. From the look on Maxine’s face, it’d been clear she hadn’t believed his excuse. He hated lying to her, and hated worrying her even more, but he *had* to know what was

going on. He was going to have to go on another patrol tonight.

Backstage at the subterranean Paris, he was just slipping his arms into his overcoat when he heard an extraordinary wheezing, trumpeting noise - it sounded, he thought, like an elephant telling a joke, and came from the direction of the green room. Odd - there hadn't been any elephants in there a couple of minutes earlier, when he'd popped in to collect his coat.

Mind you, *that* hadn't been there, either, he thought, as he looked into the room: a blue police call box, standing at the far end of the room, not much less out of place than an elephant would have been. A television prop, presumably, delivered to the wrong department.

The door of the police box opened, and out stepped a girl with short, dark hair, dressed rather like a teenager in an American film. 'Hello,' she said, spotting Max. 'Would you mind telling me where this is?'

'I suspect you're a bit off course,' said Max. 'This is the Paris Studio.' The girl was evidently none the wiser - she must be a complete newcomer to the BBC - so he added: 'Lower Regent Street? It's a theatre where we record radio programmes that need a live audience.'

'Oh, London,' she said, looking slightly disappointed.

Max laughed. Just how lost was she? 'Afraid so. What were you hoping for - Timbuktu?'

'At the very least,' she said. 'This may sound like a silly question, but what year is it?'

'On the contrary,' Max assured her, 'as I spent the afternoon lunching with the Deputy Head of Variety (Radio), I can tell you that's nowhere near the silliest question I've heard today.' He walked towards her, his hand outstretched. 'It's 1955, and I'm Max Wheeler.'

One thing the war had taught Max - a lesson undermined only slightly by a decade in show business - was to accept the validity of first impressions. He liked this girl; she seemed sweet, but lively with it. She didn't strike him as pushy, but neither was she coy or apologetic. She no doubt had her own reasons for asking completely mad questions, and she clearly didn't much care how they might sound to other people. He and Maxine hadn't had children - just as well, as it turned out - but if he had had a daughter, he wouldn't have minded one like this.

The girl gave him a big smile and shook his hand firmly. 'I'm Susan. Pleased to meet you.'

The police box door opened again, disgorging an old man with long, white hair and wearing Victorian costume. Good lord, thought Max, how many of them did that thing contain? It was obviously a pretty high-class prop. The Victorian gent quickly closed the door.

'Oh, and this is my grandfather,' said Susan. 'He's the Doctor.'

A stage name, Max presumed. The chap was undoubtedly either an actor or a comic, and some of these old boys would rather die than step out of character, on stage or off.

'Max Wheeler - pleased to meet you, Doctor. I think,' he added, out of politeness, 'I might have seen your act, before the war.'

The Doctor ignored him entirely, and turned to Susan. 'When and where, hmm? Have you found out, or have you been wasting your time on chit-chat, as usual?'

'The Paris Studio, Lower Regent Street, London, 1955,' Susan replied, apparently taking no offence at her grandfather's rudeness.

The Doctor clearly wasn't pleased by the information. 'Ridiculous,' he muttered. 'London, 1955? Backwards and sideways? Absurd.'

'I know what you mean.' Susan gave a sulky sigh. 'All of space and time to choose from, and what do we manage? A few miles, and less than a decade. Still, we might as well have a look around now we're

here. You wouldn't mind showing us around, would you, Max?'
'Delighted,' said Max - and he was. The gods of comedy had sent him a charming lunatic to take his mind off things. Who was he to spurn their gift? And he liked the way she used his first name without asking his permission. If there was one thing Max Wheeler couldn't stand, it was deference.

The Doctor turned back to the police box prop. 'Oh, you must do as you wish, young lady. Yes, you go off and enjoy yourself, don't you worry about me. If you want me, which I don't suppose you shall, you'll find me here, working on the TARDIS.' At the door of the blue box, he turned to wave a finger at his granddaughter. 'But hear me, girl. I shall be finished in half an hour, and if you're not here I'll leave without you. Yes, I shall.'

'Don't mind Grandfather,' Susan whispered, as the old man vanished back inside his police box. 'He gets grumpy when he thinks time and space are mucking him about.'

Laughing, Max said, 'My dear, I know the feeling.'

'It's a sort of recorded radio show,' Max explained. The funny girl was charmingly ignorant about show business - it was no wonder she'd managed to deliver a TV prop to a radio studio. You'd think her granddad might have known better, with all his years in the game, but perhaps the poor old boy's mind wasn't quite what it might have been. Max had known a bloke on the halls who went senile, which was very sad bemuse he made his living with a memory act. 'Magnificanus the Mentalist' - kept turning up at the wrong theatres.

Still, he was a bit surprised that a girl her age hadn't even *heard* of *Anyway, As I Say*. Had they really become so old-hat, so soon? Or perhaps eccentricity ran in Susan's family. 'The Doctor' -what sort of act could that be? Magician, possibly. Card tricks and funny mirrors. *'Anyway* is in its seventh year,' he told her, as they stood at the back of the auditorium, looking down the darkened ranks of seats towards the small stage. 'It enjoys what they call a "following", which means that not many people like it but those who do like it a lot.' And even its following was waning, if he was

honest. Intellectual comedy fans were a fickle lot, always looking out for the next thing, and the mass of wireless listeners had never quite fallen in love with *Anyway*.

'Is it just you in the show?'

'There's two of us regulars: Max and Maxine, we used to be a cross-talk duo just after the war. We like to think what we do now is a little more advanced. But of course it's no good asking you bemuse you've never heard us.'

'Sorry,' said Susan. 'I'll listen to the next one if I possibly can, I promise. Is Maxine your wife?'

'Tone of voice gave me away, I suppose? She used to be. Now we're back to being just partners, and good friends, which was how it should always have stayed.'

'Why are you divorced, if you're so friendly?'

'We're so friendly because we're divorced,' said Max, thinking she was rather direct for such a youngster. But then that was the kids these days - and good luck to them. They wouldn't obey orders quite so blindly as their elders did. Besides, her directness made her easy to talk to; to confide in, even. She was probably a student, he reckoned, doing the props job part-time. 'What are you studying, Susan?'

'Me? Oh, you know - quantum theory, mostly. Bit of relativity, perhaps. Just whatever pops into Grandfather's head, to be honest. And the pre-history of cricket, of course - that's my favourite!'

'Sounds wonderful.' Max had left school at 14, and never really felt he'd missed out on much. Except when lively young girls told him what they were studying, and he hardly knew what the words meant 'Anyway, apart from me and Maxine, there's what we grandly call a "guest star" to play all the bit parts, a writer, the producer and an FX man to make the funny noises - and that's the team. A tight little unit, as we used to say in the war.'

‘Well, it’s very exciting to meet a famous radio star.’

‘You’re very kind, mademoiselle. To tell you the truth, *Anyway* is one of those shows that was seen as rather clever when it began, but frankly we’ve been made somewhat redundant by the new directions in comedy. You know, the Goons, Hancock and so on.’ And then, to his own surprise, Max heard himself telling the strange girl what was really worrying him. ‘The thing is, Susan, our audience is dying.’ He looked her in the eyes, and finally spoke his fears our loud: ‘Literally, dying.’

No matter what he tried, the old ship wouldn’t budge and the Doctor was growing increasingly frustrated, sweaty and impatient. If he lived to be a thousand, he’d never get used to this antiquated excuse for a TARDIS. A junkyard was the best place for it. Assuming he could persuade it to return there.

Yet this present immobility was more than the craft’s usual temperamental nature, he felt. ‘Almost as if the TARDIS won’t allow us to leave this place and time.’ He tugged at a tangle of transistors, without noticeable effect. ‘Hmm! As if there is some reason for keeping us here.’

‘You must talk to my grandfather,’ Susan told Max, taking the comedian by the hand and hurrying him back towards the green room. ‘He’ll be interested to hear about this.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Oh, he just will,’ she assured him. ‘He’s interested in most things, especially if they’re horrid.’

‘There you are!’ A tall, anxious-looking woman paused with her hand on the green room door. ‘Honestly, Max, I’ve been hunting for you everywhere.’

‘Maxine, I’m so sorry - I became distracted. This is my new friend, Susan. She’s -’

‘Pleased to meet you, Susan.’ Maxine managed a quick nod and half

a smile, but Max could see her heart wasn't in it. 'Max, it's too bad. You had us all worried.'

He ushered the two women through the door, one arm for each. 'I'm sorry, sweetheart, I'll explain all later. Now, come and meet Susan's granddad. He's an old pro, you'll love him.'

Susan knocked on the police box door and the old man opened it a crack, just enough to reveal his visibly annoyed face. He looked like Punch peering round the curtain.

'Doctor, may I present Maxine, my -'

'What is it, Susan? What is the purpose of these endless interruptions?'

'Grandfather, Max has something to tell you. There's something strange going on here.'

'Yes, yes, I know that,' said the Doctor, as he went back into the box and shut the door behind him.

'I don't know who that old actor-laddie is,' said Maxine, 'but he could learn some manners.'

Susan gave that serious consideration for a moment: 'No... no, I don't think he could, actually. Excuse me a moment, I'd better see what he's up to.' And then she was gone too.

'What are they doing,' Maxine whispered, 'inside a pretend police box?'

Max shrugged 'Painting it?'

She jabbed him with an elbow, which he took to be a good sign. 'Don't be daft! They don't paint the inside of TV props.'

'I don't know what they do on TV,' said Max, 'and nor do I plan to find out. Not until they start paying proper money, anyway.'

‘Max, I want you to promise me you weren’t... doing anything silly tonight. While we were all over at the pub.’

He put his arms around her. ‘I swear I wasn’t doing anything. Silly or otherwise.’ He didn’t mention that the *only* thing that had prevented him was hearing that weird noise. Good God, he’d forgotten about that: the elephants. What was that? Could it be anything to do with what was going on?

‘I worry about you, Max. I think the war affected you more than you realise.’

‘The war affected everyone, sweetheart. It was really quite a big do.’

She took his broad wrists in her hands. ‘No jokes. Tell me what you think is happening.’

Max freed his left hand and rubbed his knuckles across his forehead.

‘I don’t know. Probably nothing.’

The studio audiences for most radio shows, *Anyway* included, consisted partly of faithful listeners, who attended every recording. Max had noticed that lately - ever since they’d moved to the Paris, in fact - each week, some of the regulars he’d become acquainted with over the years were missing.

‘When I ask the others about them,’ he told Maxine, ‘either they don’t know, or else they tell me their friends have passed away quite suddenly.’

Maxine managed a laugh, and Max appreciated the effort it cost her. ‘Just proves what everyone’s been saying, love. We need a younger audience.’ He pretended to laugh with her.

‘And as the DHV(R) was telling me at great length this afternoon, to get a younger audience we need a younger act.’

The door opened, and a thin, balding man bustled in. ‘If you two want to hold hands in empty green rooms, you’ll have to get married again. I’ve been looking for you, where have you been?’

‘We’ve been in here, Jolyon, holding hands. It’s more of a thrill when you’re single.’

‘That’ll have to wait, I’m afraid. We’re going to have to redo the opening duologue. I’ve booked one of the broom cupboard studios at EH.’

‘Did we fluff it?’ asked Maxine.

‘You? Never! No, darling, that damned humming noise came through on the recording again.’

Max shivered, but decided now was not the time to mention that the mysterious BBC hum was something else that gave him the creeps.

‘You want us straight away, Jolyon?’

‘If you please, children. Oh, one other thing,’ said the producer, holding the door for his stars. ‘There’s another whip-round for flowers, sad to say. One of our regulars has died. Her sister let us know. She was allegedly our “biggest fan”. Name of Madge.’

From somewhere in his icy guts, Max found his voice. ‘Which one was Madge?’

‘You know her, Max- the one with the feather in her hat.’

‘Ha! You’re an old fool.’ The Doctor patted the main console. ‘No, not you - me. I am addressing myself.’

‘Why do you say that, Grandfather?’ Susan was quite used to intervening in the Doctor’s conversations with inanimate objects.

‘I thought the TARDIS was trying to tell me something. I came over all superstitious, Susan, can you believe that? Ha! But it’s just that

humming noise - primitive air conditioning, no doubt. It's upsetting the old girl. It's a rather complicated pattern of frequencies - as soon as I can analyse it properly, I can cancel it out, and we can be on our way.' As he spoke, he took a series of readings from what looked very much like a Victorian pocket watch, hanging from a fob.

'But what about what Max told me? The disappearing audience - don't you want to investigate that, Grandfather?'

The Doctor sneered. 'I suspect that your friend's understanding of what might constitute a remarkable death rate is unsophisticated. It's yet another thing these people don't teach in their so-called schools.'

'All right, but now we're here we could at least stay long enough to watch a radio show being made. That might be interesting.'

Her grandfather made it clear that he was not a great admirer of radio comedy - or of broadcasting in general. He preferred the music hall. 'It's unhealthy for people to sit at home, laughing on their own, instead of as part of a physically present audience. It's not healthy, let me tell you.'

'I've sometimes heard you laughing on your own, Grandfather,' Susan teased him. 'Though not at comedians, admittedly.'

'What? Nonsense, nonsense,' said the Doctor, looking up from his readings. 'Oh, come here, child.' She slipped her arm around his waist, and he ruffled her hair. 'We could spare just one day, I suppose.'

She looked up at him. 'And you will listen to what Max has to say? After all, it's an odd coincidence, the BBC's air conditioning producing the exact vibrations needed to immobilise the TARDIS.'

A horrified look spread across the Doctor's face. *'Coincidence?* I've been neglecting your education. Now, where did I put that pack of cards... '

The long, curved corridors in the basements of Broadcasting House smelled, not unpleasantly, of pipe smoke, new carpet, and dust burning on electrical machinery. To Susan, the corridors seemed to go on for ever, and all looked identical. Even at gone nine in the evening, the place was alive with men and women hurrying in all directions, most of them carrying precarious armfuls of papers or reels of tape, many of them nodding to Susan and the Doctor, a few trying to walk straight through them as if they weren't there.

'This building is shaped like a ship,' Susan realised, but her grandfather wasn't listening. He was marching along with his head down, studying his fob watch.

Suddenly he gave a cry of 'Well, now!' and flung open one of the endless series of heavy doors that lined the corridor.

'Get out, you idiot!' came a yell from within. The Doctor nodded pleasantly, and did as he was told.

'Grandfather,' said Susan, pointing to an illuminated 'on air' sign above the door, 'I think perhaps when that's lit, we're not supposed to go in.'

'Undoubtedly, my dear, quite so.' The Doctor stroked his chin, never taking his eyes off the instrument in his hand. 'You notice the humming?'

'Yes, just like at the Paris.'

'Not just like, child - no.' He tapped the fob watch. 'To the ear, perhaps, but my oscillometer here tells me it's quite distinct. And that is most interesting.'

'Susan, Doctor - you found my note. I'm so glad.' Somehow, Max hadn't liked to disturb the odd pair in their police box, but nor had he cared to abandon them so abruptly without explanation. 'But I expected to see you in reception. How on earth did you get past the commissionaires?'

The commissionaires of Broadcasting House - a uniformed corps,

composed entirely of former servicemen - were indeed notoriously unyielding, and fiercely protective of BH against unauthorised persons. Or bloody-minded and officious, as some would put it. And they'd only got worse, Max was convinced, since *The Goon Show* started taking the mickey out of them.

Clearly stifling a giggle, Susan explained: 'They seemed to think Grandfather was part of the show.'

'Hmm? Nonsense. Now, young man, I want a word with you.' While Jolyon hurried off to edit the tape they'd just recorded, the Doctor took Max by the elbow and set off briskly towards the lift. Susan and Maxine fell in behind them.

'This business of your dying audience: if I'm to help, you must tell me everything.'

Max coughed. 'No offence, old thing, but what good could you do?'

The Doctor smiled. For the first time in his life, as far as Max knew. 'Oh, I do have some small expertise in matters of the unusual.'

So that's it, thought Max, the Doctor had also been involved in secret war work. It'd be a relief to talk to someone who really understood. 'You mean... I may speak freely to you?'

'Of course, dear boy - of course.'

It was a short walk to the George - it'd have to be, Max explained, otherwise the musicians would never make it back to the studio - but when they arrived, Maxine was annoyed to discover that Hancock's mob had commandeered their table again.

'Never mind,' said Max, heading for the busy bar. 'They'll soon be underneath it.'

Max and Maxine soon tired of pointing out broadcasting celebrities who Susan and her grandfather had clearly never heard of- though Max secretly enjoyed their blank reaction to the name Ted Ray - and, once they were settled with their drinks, he and the Doctor

drew to one end of the table, while Susan and Maxine took the other.

‘I was a postman back home in South Wales,’ Max told the old man, ‘but when the war in Spain began, I volunteered to fight with the International Brigades. As a result ofwhich, by the way, I am for ever forbidden entry to the United States. So that’s why I’m not a Hollywood star.’

The Doctor sipped his glass of porter, and said nothing. Another gag wasted, thought Max, and continued his story.

‘Because I had that experience of guerrilla warfare, when the war started over here I was recruited to an auxunit. We trained under Tom Wintringham. Inspirational man - more or less invented what they called “the people’s war”. Believed in arming and training the whole population through the Home Guard, men and women, not only to resist the German invasion, but also to take over the whole country in a socialist revolution if the government and the bankers and the landowners tried to make peace with Hitler. Did you ever run into Wintringham, Doctor?’

‘Not yet,’ said the Doctor. ‘Do go on, my boy.’

‘Yes, so - I spent the first 18 months of the war living in a cave in the Mendips, waiting for the Nazis. Look.’ He fished about in his jacket pocket, and came out with a set of viciously spiked knuckledusters. ‘These were special issue. They still fit, you see. I got rid of the cyanide capsule, though. A man can have too many souvenirs. Never used the spikes in anger - but on the training dummy, they took the poor beggar’s face clean off.’ He took a long pull at his pint of bitter. ‘We were given lists, regularly updated, of “unsound” locals who would have to be murdered as soon as the invasion took place. We practised sabotage attacks, and learned to speak German - neither of them skills for which I’ve found much use in civilian life.’ ‘And after 18 months, hmm?’

‘Right, well. Once the Soviets had entered the war, and so the

immediate threat of German invasion had receded, I was reassigned

to a normal army outfit. It was there, like most comics of my generation, that I learned my trade, doing forces' entertainments. Took to it; stuck with it; here I am.' He looked at the knuckledusters for a moment, and then put them away. 'That and Spain - that was my university. More than ten years on, I think most ofwhat you hear on the wireless is still forces' comedy, though it presents itself as all modern and civvy street.

It's all shaped by the war, really.'

Realising he was banging on a bit, and in danger of turning maudlin, Max added: 'But you must have done some comedy in your time?' He still couldn't quite categorise the old man, with his mannered ways and his absurd costume. Mind you, he'd known some of the older turns to insist on wearing their full stage get-up for radio recordings. 'I mean, you're not actually a doctor, are you?'

'Oh, young man, there are all sorts of things I'm not actually,' the Doctor replied, draining his glass.

'I think it's just the guilt that survivors often feel,' Maxine told Susan, in a soft voice. 'All his stuff about "something followed us all home from that war, Maxine." He came home, that's the point, and so many didn't.' She laughed, and tipped an inch of gin and tonic down her throat. 'Plus he's a comedian, so he's a miserable old beggar to begin with.'

'You think it's all in his head, this business of the audience dying off?' 'Well, people do die, don't they?' She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself as well as Susan. 'Especially as the days get shorter. There's influenza, TB, smog and so on.'

'This Madge you mentioned. Did she die of influenza?'

Maxine frowned. 'That is a bit odd, it's true. She was quite young, apparently quite healthy. Max saw her being cuddled by her chap in the street, which doesn't sound like someone who's desperately ill. But apparently her internal organs had undergone some terrible trauma, presumably some awful accident, and yet the police haven't been able to find out where or when or what - let alone how

someone so badly injured managed to drag herself home to die in her own bed.'

'I see,' Susan began, but Maxine spoke over her.

'But the important thing is that her death came miles away from the Paris, and days after the recording - so it can't be connected, can it?'

In his office at BH, Jolyon had nearly completed editing the re-recorded duologue. He still loved the novelty of working with magnetic tape. If they'd still been reliant on the old acetate discs, Anyway would have been a very different, less inventive show.

He heard someone enter the room, without knocking or speaking. Probably a cleaner. 'Give me a mo,' he said, his attention on his work.

'Remain calm,' said a voice behind him.

'But tell me about your war, Doctor,' said Max. 'If you're allowed to.' 'My war? Oh, I've never really been able to see the point of war.' Max understood; the Doctor couldn't, or didn't care to, talk about it.

Most men were the same, he'd found, who'd seen active service.

'Now, young man - tell me about these current deaths.'

'Probably all in my mind, but... for some reason they remind me of something from my Mendip days. Never knew the details - I don't think even our local commanders did - but word came down in 1940 that we should be prepared for clusters of German occupiers to die, mysteriously but apparently of natural causes. At the time, we guessed it was a reference to some sort of secret gas weapon. We expressed our unease through official channels - our unit was chiefly composed of rebels and mavericks, we didn't trust the high-ups, and we weren't scared to speak our minds - and, after that, it was never mentioned again.' He lit a cigarette, and thought for a moment. 'Except that there was a rumour that it was all part of

something called Operation Shaker. But you see my dilemma, Doctor? If these deaths now - mysterious but apparently natural, as they are - are due to some sort of germ warfare experiment gone wrong, then what should I do? Tell the police? Tell the press?'

The Doctor's response rather took him aback. 'Tell me about the humming noise, at your two workplaces.'

'The BBC hum? Well, I don't know what to tell you. BH is supposed to have the world's most advanced air-conditioning system, so we're told. Or it was when they put it in.'

'Have you always recorded your entertainment at the Paris?'

'No, we used to go out from the Camden.' Max gestured across the room with his chin. 'Booted out to make way for Hancock and his clowns. Why do you ask?'

Any answer the Doctor might have given was cut off by the arrival of Jolyon, who slumped into a chair next to Max. He looked awful: red-faced, running with sweat, his breathing loud and irregular. He put a trembling hand on Max's upper arm. 'Was that you, you idiot? You scared the life out of me, you could have killed me - you know I hate stupid practical jokes!'

'Steady on, old thing - I don't know what you're talking about. What's happened?' Max and Maxine managed to calm their producer sufficiently for him to manage a few shaky gulps of brandy, and to tell his story. was about to turn around, to see who it was, when the person grabbed me from behind and - well, *embraced* me, there's no other way of putting it. After a few seconds he let go, and when I felt up to looking round, there was no one there. It was horrible.'

His colleagues tried to josh him out of his terror. 'Must've been one of the secretaries,' Max suggested. 'Got a crush on you.'

'No, no. It was too strong to be a woman - it must have been a man, a strong man. Like you.'

‘Oh, well, whatever you prefer, ducky,’ said Max, signalling with his eyebrows for the other half of the double act to take over.

‘Perhaps it was the BH ghost,’ said Maxine. ‘A butler, isn’t it, with a twirling moustache?’

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Max. ‘Why would a butler be haunting a modern radio station? No, the BH ghost is a wandering musician, been seen all over the building, eternally searching for a studio he never finds. Which we can all sympathise with, eh, Jolyon?’

But if anything, the producer’s state was worsening.

‘We’d better get him home,’ said Maxine. ‘I’ll go and find a cab.’ Preoccupied with his stricken friend, Max still heard the girl say: ‘He’s in shock, Grandfather - do you see how he’s trembling?’

The Doctor was fiddling with some sort of fob watch. ‘I wouldn’t say trembling, child. I would say oscillating.’

Max turned in time to see a look of sadness cross the old man’s face.

The TARDIS was in the green room, and the green room was out of bounds. Another programme was being recorded - unusually late at night, due to an earlier power failure - and so the Doctor had little choice but to accept Susan’s suggestion that they sit in the auditorium and watch the show.

The scene was still being set as they took their seats. The stage itself was expanded to twice its previous size, by means of extension pieces lugged into position by brown-coated attendants. Then came the placing of the microphones at various positions; a precise business, apparently, which involved many fine adjustments by the stage manager, and muttered curses from the attendants.

As the cast took to the stage from the green room, it became clear to Susan that this was a much larger production than Max and Maxine’s ‘tight little unit’. There were seven performers - most of them taking on several roles each - along with a ten-piece orchestra to perform the theme and incidental music. The whole affair was

presided over by a solemn announcer in a dinner jacket, who seemed to be the butt of much of the humour.

Susan was surprised to see how much of the comedy was visual: some comics delighted in twanging the announcer's braces, or flipping his bow tie, while others worked up the studio audience with funny faces and silly poses about which, of course, the listeners at home would know nothing.

She loved every minute of it. The endless to-ing and fro-ing around the microphones seemed superbly choreographed, so that no two comics ever bumped into each other. She was fascinated by the practised flick with which the artistes turned over the pages of their scripts in such a way that the microphones wouldn't catch any rustle. The very existence of the special-effects door - standing erect and alone to one side of the stage, with its own dedicated microphone, and an assistant stage manager ready to open, close and slam it on cue - struck Susan as impossibly funny.

Before long she was joining in with the cheers, boos and raspberry noises that greeted the appearances, and catchphrases, of what were evidently regular characters. She had no idea what 'Only twice? That's not nice!' meant, but she applauded along with everyone else every time she heard it. To her surprised delight, her grandfather laughed louder than anyone, from start to finish.

The recording was ending as Maxine slipped into the seat next to the Doctor. It was clear from her expression that she had something to say, but wasn't quite ready to say it. Instead, she asked them how they'd liked the show. Susan was enthusiastic, but the Doctor gallantly insisted that it was 'nowhere near as good as your own show'.

Dabbing at her mouth and nose with a crumpled handkerchief, Maxine told them she and Max found this kind of programme rather old-fashioned. The Goons have taken surreal situations and silly catchphrases as far as they can ever go. In future, comedy will abandon larger-than-life characters and be much more down-to-earth. Max and I think that...'

But there she ran out of steam, and her tears flowed. The Doctor patted her arm, and asked quietly: ‘When did he die, your friend?’

She told them that Jolyon had died in the taxi, outside his flat in Belsize Park. ‘He’d had a weak heart for years, and the shock of that stupid episode in BH must have been too much for him.’

‘A weak heart,’ said the Doctor. ‘Mm. Where is Max now? I think we must act urgently. Fetch him please, and meet us at the TARDIS.’

‘The what?’

‘The police box,’ Susan explained.

When Maxine had gone, the Doctor showed Susan the readings he’d taken on his oscillometer of Broadcasting House, the Paris during this recording and earlier, when the theatre was empty, and of the dying producer in the George. ‘They are all related, but they are all slightly different.’

‘What does that mean, Grandfather?’

‘We shall find out. When your young friends return, we shall find out.’

By the time Max and Maxine joined them in the green room, the Paris was deserted but for one attendant, impatient to lock up. The Doctor was trying to persuade him to switch off the air conditioning; the attendant was insisting that to commit such an act without proper authority would be tantamount to resigning his job.

‘Look here,’ said Max, ‘We need the place for a late rehearsal, and since you have no specific orders authorising you to stay late, hadn’t you best give me the keys and scoot off?’

‘On your authority, Mr Wheeler? Very well I’ll say goodnight, all.’

Susan whispered to the Doctor that she hadn’t thought the humans had invented androids, yet. In his other ear, Max whispered that he needn’t worry about the air conditioning.

‘I’ll fix that. They taught us all about switching things off in the auxiliary. Mostly with dynamite, admittedly, but even so... ‘

‘Now,’ said the Doctor a few minutes later, when the air conditioning had stopped. ‘What do we notice? Hmm?’

No one said anything as the Doctor studied his oscillator. Then Maxine got it. ‘If the air conditioning’s off then why can I still hear its noise?’

‘Precisely, my dear. The BBC hum, as you call it, is unconnected with the air conditioning. It has another source.’

‘Then what is it, Doctor?’

‘I said earlier that I couldn’t see the point of war - but one thing war is very good at is hastening technological advance. Now, listen to me: we are going to perform an episode of your splendid comedy, here and now.’

At the Doctor’s insistence, Max and Maxine set up the stage as it would be for a recording of*Anyway, As ISay,* with everything in its precise position.

‘The FX table should be about a yard to the right,’ Maxine ruled, as she and Max surveyed the results of their labours half an hour later. ‘Well, the Doctor did say we should be precise.’

‘Quite right, young lady,’ Max replied, his impression of her grandfather so uncannily accurate that Susan had to spend a couple of minutes pretending to blow her nose.

Tea-stained copies of the most recent script were salvaged from the green room, and the strange performance began.

As the comics rattled through their opening duologue, the Doctor wandered around the auditorium, checking his device, and muttering with dissatisfaction.

Whatever he was up to, Susan could see, it wasn't working.

Halfway through a sketch about rocket scientists, Maxine had to call the Doctor three times to get his attention. 'I said: at this point, the script calls for a spot effect.'

Delighted, Susan leapt from her front-row seat. 'I'll do those!'

'All right. You need to pour those marbles from the wicker basket into the tin bucket. Do it quite slowly, and from a height.'

'Oh, I know,' Susan assured her. 'I've seen it done. Only twice?' she added. 'That's not nice!'

'Quickly, child,' her grandfather scolded her.

They continued, with Susan improvising sound effects now and then from the varied items set out on the table, but after 15 minutes the Doctor's disappointment was still obvious.

'Have you got a train to catch, Doctor?' asked Max. 'You keep checking your pocket watch.'

'Never mind that, why have you stopped?'

'We're a man short. We've reached a scene involving our "special guest star". He's playing a high mutt judge.'

'Susan!'

'I can't do it, Grandfather. I'm on FX'

It took the Doctor a moment to realise that they were all staring at him expectantly, and that Max was holding out a copy of the script to him. He made a great show of reluctance and annoyance, but Susan suspected that he rather enjoyed the opportunity to play the old ham.

The show went on, but whatever her grandfather had been expecting, it didn't seem to be happening. At one point, she laughed

out loud at one of Max's lines about seaside donkeys and her laughter echoed around the empty auditorium.

'Of course!' said the Doctor. 'Laughter, the very essence of this place. That's what's missing. Now, what do we do about that, hmm?'

'How lifelike does the laughter need to be?' asked Max.

The Doctor thought about it. 'Well, now. The laughter must be variable, within parameters - it's the one input where absolute precision can't possibly be achieved or required. I think any laughter would do, my boy.'

'Then wait here.' Max nipped off backstage with the attendant's keys, and swiftly returned wheeling, with some effort, a reel-to-reel tape machine built into a big trolley. He plugged it in, switched it on: and they heard laughter.

'A tape of laughs cut out of recordings, when we're editing for time,' he explained. 'It's from the good old days, when we had more laughter than we could deal with! We used to lend it to lesser shows.'

They resumed yet again, the laughter track randomly providing bursts of laughter, at various intervals and of various types and durations. It made for an odd atmosphere, as the invisible audience's reactions only occasionally chimed with what was happening on stage.

'Your line, Max,' prompted Susan during a sketch set in the Coliseum. There was an awkward pause, as both women realised that Max was having difficulty simultaneously holding back tears and saying his lines. Maxine dug her elbow into his side. 'Come on, Sergeant Wheeler. It's not as if this is the first time in our career we've made an audience laugh in all the wrong places.'

'I'm sorry,' said Max, swallowing heavily, and wiping his brow on his sleeve. 'It's just... all of it. The deaths in the audience, and now poor old Jolyon, and the show gradually sinking beneath the waves.

An absent audience laughing where there's no laugh lines - itjust strikes me as a horribly believable vision of our future. I'm sorry to be so pathetic.'

The audience guffawed, and applauded long and hard. 'Grandfather, this isn't working. It's too random.'

Now it was the Doctor's turn to rush off. When he reappeared, he was carrying one end of a length of electrical cable, which he attached to the tape recorder. He took more readings on his oscillator, and made further adjustments.

'What are you doing?' Susan asked, tactfully avoiding Max and Maxine as they shared a cigarette in the second row.

'This cable connects the laughter tape to the frequency analyser I've been using to try to free the TARDIS from the effects of the hum. Comedy isn't magic, Susan, you see? It's merely a matter of rhythm. The TARDIS, with luck, will analyse the rhythm of the script, compare it to the laughs stored on the tape, and provide bursts ofmore or less accurate laughter.' The pocket watch chimed its readiness. 'Right, ladies and gentleman - from the top, if you please.'

'From the top,' echoed Maxine. 'Get 'er!'

The new laughs were certainly more realistic and appropriate, although they always came very slightly late. 'That should do,' the Doctor muttered to himself. 'Close enough for comedy.'

'Grandfather, you are absolutely sure you know what you're doing?'

The Doctor scoffed. 'My dear, the last time I was absolutely sure I knew what I was doing was 150 years ago. Most frustrating afternoon of my entire life. Now, you concentrate on what you're doing, young lady. No fluffs, please!'

Max's amplified voice cut across them. 'What the holy hell is that?' They all looked towards the back of the auditorium, where a humanoid figure - elongated and shimmering - was, as they

watched, emerging from within the wall itself.

‘Ah’, said the Doctor. ‘It seems the laughter was indeed the charm.’

The humanoid began an unhurried lope down the aisle towards the stage. Retreating to the wings, Maxine found two more of the creatures loitering there, and another blocking their exit towards the green room and the rest of the building.

Max stepped forward to put himselfbetween the advancing monster and the stage. He was a little surprised to find himself doing so, and fleetingly reflected that this was what made a hero: involuntary reflexes born of training.

Hero or not, the Doctor waved him back to the others, and took his place in the vanguard. ‘I think I might be more useful in this situation, my boy.’

‘Ju-jitsu, Doctor?’ Max asked, and didn’t quite catch the old man’s muttered reply, which sounded something like, ‘Not martial arts - two hearts.’

The vibrating creature was apparently in no hurry, taking its time to weigh the Doctor up before dosing on him. Its comrades merely held their positions.

‘What are these things, Doctor?’ asked Maxine.

‘In their own tongue I imagine they’re called “the people” - I’m afraid almost every race in the galaxy is. But your wartime government might, I suspect, have called them Shakers.’

Max noticed that the Doctor was still obsessed with his fob watch. Perhaps he was playing for time - but time for what?

‘Don’t let it grab you, Grandfather,’ said Susan. ‘That’s how it killed Jolyon.’

Her warning seemed to come too late. The Shaker embraced the Doctor, who cried out in agony. But almost immediately, the Shaker

let go, stood back, and gave the old man what struck Max as a very considering look. ‘Your oscillations are different,’ it said. *‘Ihre Oszillationen sind abweichend.’*

‘Good God,’ said Max, impressed despite himself ‘It’s bilingual.’

‘Well, I’m not prejudiced,’ said Maxine. She let out an hysterical yelp of a giggle. ‘Sorry. Pull myself together.’

‘My oscillations are indeed different, my dear chap,’ said the Doctor, in a friendly tone. ‘And my guess is that you don’t have any orders about killing our kind, do you?’

‘Your kind?’ said Max, but Susan and the Doctor ignored him.

A high-pitched chattering noise bounced around the walls of the theatre; the Shakers in conference, Max guessed. The result of their discussion was soon announced.

‘You are alien forms, allied with the occupiers. We are alien forms, allied with the natives. Therefore we will kill you. Remain calm while we adjust our frequencies.’ The pattern of the shimmering within and around the Shakers’ bodies altered, as did the humming of the air.

‘Oh, yes, remain calm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Excellent advice, thank you. But what about these two, hmm?’ He indicated Max and Maxine. ‘They’re not aliens - they’re humans.’

The lead Shaker - the only one with a speaking part, as Max had come to think of him - looked him over for a moment, and then spoke to him rapidly, in German. It was a simple inquiry about the function of the building they were in, and he replied to it, in German, without thinking. It was only when he heard the Doctor’s groan that he realised what he’d done.

‘They are agents of the occupation. We will kill them when we have killed you. Long live the King.’

‘I’m afraid there’s bad news on that front,’ said Susan. ‘The King is

dead.'

'But the good news,' the Doctor added, 'is that the war is over, and your side won.'

'What are you talking about, Doctor?' asked Maxine.

The Doctor addressed the lead Shaker. 'How's the frequency adjustment going? Have I time to tell her your story?' The Shakers remained silent, as their changing patterns continued to flicker, so the Doctor carried on. 'The Shakers are from another planet - indeed, another dimension, for want of a more easily explainable concept.'

'Condescending old thing, isn't he?' Max muttered.

'It was the method of death - the embrace, followed some time later by the extreme trauma to internal organs - which made me suspect extra-dimensional involvement. Everything in the universe oscillates at its own frequency, you see? Yes, yes; the difference in oscillation frequencies between beings from different dimensions sets up a vibration when they come into contact, which, over a period of time determined by other factors - health, age, body mass and so on - proves fatal. Clearly the Shakers have developed some form of shielding which allows them to use it as a means of assassination, rather than of kamikaze attack.'

'But why are they killing us?' asked Maxine.

'Oh, just following orders, nothing personal. Isn't that right, old chap?' The Shaker made no reply. The Doctor covertly studied his pocket watch. 'When Max told me about Operation Shaker -'

Maxine gasped. 'These creatures were working for our government!'

'Yes, my dear. They must have appeared here at Britain's darkest hour - not by coincidence, I'll bet- and offered their services.'

As resistance fighters, Max realised, when every sane person in Britain believed that occupation by Germany was inevitable and

imminent. ‘The Shakers would have fought a terrorist war against the German occupation, alongside people like me. But - why?’

‘The frequency adjustment is complete,’ the Shaker spokesman announced. ‘Remain calm.’

‘What was the contract?’ The Doctor’s voice was urgent now. ‘What did the British government promise you in exchange?’

‘A landmass named India is to be ours.’

‘Lebensraum,’ said Max. ‘Nice to know irony was thriving in our darkest hour.’

‘Death will be rapid if you submit to the embrace; slow if you struggle.’ The Shaker advanced on the Doctor, its arms outstretched. The old man called out ‘Max - identify yourself!’

‘What?’

‘Sergeant, identify yourself.’

Of course! ‘I am Sergeant Max Wheeler, of the South Mendip Auxiliary Unit. All Shakers are to place themselves under my command forthwith.’

Again, the Shakers paused and conferred.

‘Do you have some sort of identification?’ Susan asked Max.

Max called out, ‘Brunete.’ He wasn’t sure his Spanish accent was up to much, but at least he hadn’t forgotten the old Mendip password. The principal Shaker replied, ‘Ouinto,’ and Max replied, ‘Belchite.’

The Shakers’ deliberations increased in pitch and rapidity. Clearly, they were unsure how to proceed. The Doctor was quick to take advantage of their hesitation. ‘The war is over, your allies won, there was no occupation. There is no need to kill anyone else. Fifteen local years have passed since the contract was made.’

More talk amongst the aliens, but calmer-sounding now. Max began to relax, just a bit. Maxine took hold of his hand, and Susan smiled at a preening Doctor. And then the speaking Shaker spoke.

‘Then why are we not in India?’

‘Oh, dear,’ said the Doctor. ‘I was afraid you were going to ask that.’ The laughter track let loose a solid roar, for the first time since the Shakers appeared; this was the first time, Max supposed, that it had detected something worth laughing at. The Doctor was again fiddling with that damn watch of his. ‘I very much fear,’ he continued, ‘that the contract was not entered into by the British in good faith. They would never have given you India. And once it was clear there would be no invasion of these islands, I imagine your status in their eyes went from useful last resort to potential threat.’

The Shakers, it appeared, needed no more discussion. ‘The British Empire has betrayed us, therefore we are now at war with the British Empire. We will kill you all. Remain calm.’

‘Yes, remain calm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Whatever you do, don’t panic. Now, Shakers, you’d better start with me, hmm? I’m the leader here. Killing the leaders would be the best use of resources, I’m sure you agree.’ He stepped sharply through the effects door, and closed it behind him. All four shakers converged on him, from various directions. There was no possibility of escape.

And still he fiddled with that antique watch! He seemed to be adjusting its hands now, and Max wondered if it was a nervous habit or part of his act. As the leading Shaker stepped around the effects door and spread its arms invitingly, the Doctor pressed a button on the tape deck.

The laughter tape began playing backwards, at an odd, stop-and-start tempo, sometimes speeded up and sometimes slowed down. The effect was increasingly disturbing; Max’s ear felt there was a rhythm in there somewhere, and couldn’t help laying to pin it down - but the more his brain struggled to make sense of what it was hearing, the more uncomfortable it became.

Maxine screamed, and Max's nose began to bleed. Susan fainted. The Doctor smiled sadly. And the Shakers collapsed to the ground. What looked like rips appeared in their bodies.

'Good Lord,' said Max. 'Their sides are splitting.'

The aliens began to fold into themselves, over and over, until there was nothing left. The Doctor switched off the tape.

'There was an extraordinary concentration of brilliant scientists in Britain at the start of the war,' the Doctor explained in the green room, over strong tea and, for Max and Maxine, brandy. 'Many of them asylum seekers and refugees from Nazi Europe. During the Britain- Shaker pact, they'd have been working flat out on studying the Shakers, looking for ways of defeating them. It is one of the eternal truths of history, that today's allies become tomorrow's enemies.'

'Let us toast the dear old Red Army,' said Max, raising his teacup.

'They seem to have found a way of adapting Shaker principles of oscillation adjustment, to trap the Shaker troops for ever within the fabric of this building - and, I suspect, of Broadcasting House.'

'Why BBC buildings?' Maxine asked.

'I think I can guess,' said Max. 'Things were a lot more factional in 1940 than we like to admit now. Some were determined to fight to the last drop. Others proposed fighting for a while, then negotiating a peace deal. Not a few were in favour of teaming up with the Nazis against Russia. I imagine that the faction of the government that was dealing with the Shakers had allies inside the BBC.'

'So what released them?'

'The specific vibrations of your show,' said the Doctor. 'The shape of this theatre, the layout of the auditorium, the precise placing of the microphones, all set up an oscillation which allowed the Shakers, one by one, to emerge from their prison. In a crowded recording session, all eyes on the stage, they weren't spotted; they slipped

away to do their duty.'

'To kill members of the audience?' said Susan.

'They most have been in a kind of suspended state all these years. Emerging, somewhat disorientated, and finding themselves in a theatre full of laughing people, in what they thought was an occupied country, they logically assumed that these happy, confident people were either occupiers or collaborators. You see? And they were opportunistic in selecting their victims - those they could catch alone and kill in secret. They couldn't do much. I'm sure most of them died during their captivity, so they were undermanned. But they did their awful best; they kept their bargain.' Max could see the Doctor was unhappy at having had to destroy the creatures. Still, he had to ask...

'How, dear boy? Not difficult, no, not difficult at all. Slaughter rarely is. It took me a while to fully analyse their oscillations, but once I'd done so I was able to produce vibration frequencies that made it impossible for them to exist in this dimension.'

With seconds to spare, thought Max, though it would perhaps be rude to mention the narrowness of their escape. 'Isn't it a somewhat bizarre coincidence that the precise vibrations of *Anyway* should release the Shakers?'

The Doctor sniffed. 'There are no coincidences,' he said.

'You mean because everything happens for a reason?'

'I most certainly do not! I mean because nothing happens for a reason. What humans call coincidence is just their own awareness of a pattern. Only arrogance or ignorance could think that your petty patterns are of concern to the universe! Still, neither quality is one in which you people seem to be in especially short supply.'

While the humans were still blinking at the insult - and at its implications - the Doctor took a pack of cards from his pocket, shuffled it, and dealt it out in perfect order, ace to king, hearts to spades. 'Now, what is the probability of that?'

‘The odds?’ said Max. ‘I happen to know that one: 635,053,559,600 to one.’

‘Correct. Now watch this.’ He dealt again, and Max felt let down when the cards this time come out in an apparently random arrangement.

‘So, what are the “odds” against that? Hmm?’

‘Oh, I get it!’ said Maxine. ‘Exactly the same as before.’

‘Precisely, my dear. Every hand of cards ever dealt has odds of 635,003,559,600 to one against being dealt - and yet still they are dealt! Patterns, you see; they’re only there if you look for them. Otherwise... well, it’s just a meaningless hum in the background, isn’t it?’

Once Maxine and Max had finally gone home, and with nothing now to prevent the ship operating, the Doctor wasted no time in heading back to the TARDIS.

Where to now, Grandfather?’ asked Susan as they entered the control room. ‘I suppose it could be anywhere, couldn’t it?’

The Doctor began to operate levers on the ship’s console. dear. I’m afraid so. I’m sorry - I know you were enjoying Totter’s Lane.’

‘You never know, Grandfather,’ said Susan. ‘Perhaps ourselves back in 1963.’

‘Quite, my our time in we’ll find

‘Don’t be ridiculous, child. The chances of that happening are far more than 635,013,559,600 to one!’

As the familiar noise of dematerialisation began, Susan felt a little wistful. She’d liked the comedians, they were fun, and she wished she could have known them longer. It would be marvellous to have some younger shipmates to accompany them in their travels.

But, of course, that was an absurd daydream. Grandfather would never in a thousand years agree to carrying passengers in the TARDIS.

'What do you mean, wait? I'm not the sort of person who's used to waiting!' Emily had never seen the Doctor's face go so red. The MOD aide backed away nervously.

'Nevertheless, sir. Until someone is available to see you and your friends, I'm going to have to ask you to wait here.'

Emily put her hand on the Doctor's arm, trying to calm him down. As the clerk left the ante-room, the Time Lord huffed and sighed but eventually was able to sit down next to Will.

'And I don't know what you 're smirking at, young man!' Will laughed. 'Nothing, Doctor.'

Emily sat down too, and the three waited in silence. Then, Emily said, 'Doctor, what do you think happened?'

'I don't know, Emily. That's why we 're here.'

'But you must have some idea. The number of mysteries you've been involved in over the years. They must have taught you something.'

The Doctor smiled at her, now totally relaxed.

'It's not as simple as that. And, anyway, what about you? You've been with UNIT, what, a few years now? I would have thought that you'd know not to expect anything other than the unexpected.'

'But are we talking a big conspiracy?' Emily continued. All those files being destroyed became they detailed some great scandal that the British military wants swept under the carpet? Or do you think we're going to find a cleaner who's thrown the wrong set ofpapers into the bin?'

'Who knows?' The Doctor beamed. 'That's what so exciting, isn't it? That's why, when I suggested this little trip, you didn't take too much convincing.'

'Maybe it'll be monsters from outer space,' said Will, taking out a

cigarette from his jacket pocket. He then seemed to think better of it, and placed it back in its pack. What?' he said, ranching Emily's teasing look. 'I just thought it might be "no smoking " in here.'

'In 1957?'Emily laughed. She was really taking to Will - she knew they'd be good friends.

'Anyway...' Will turned to the Doctor. 'Colonel Chaudhry's right. You must have some idea what we 're looking for. My money's on something paranormal - it'll be ghosts or something.'

'Lieutenant,' sighed the Doctor. 'Why would ghosts delete records of wartime activity 12 years after the event? And, at any rate, we should keep an open mind. Quite often, events that appear to be magical or even from "beyond the grave" have a completely different explanation.'

Short Trips:
The Quality of Leadership

Pretty much on every level, Allyn Gibson went non-traditional with this story. The theme of The Quality of Leadership was encounters the Doctor had with leaders throughout time and space. Plato isn't someone you think of as a leader - certainly not in the same way as King Arthur, Queen Boudicca, King Henry VIII, Martin Luther, Spartacus and Calpurnia, Emperor Theodoric, or Sir William Wallace, all also represented in the anthology.

He went with the Sixth Doctor, the only one of the dozen authors to do so, and in fact told a story that could not possibly have worked with any other Doctor - or even this one at a different time, as the story was very much an artefact of the Doctor's experiences in Trial *of a* Time Lord. And, since he was doing Plato anyhow, he gave us the story in the form of a Socratic dialogue.

Yes, really.

In my admittedly biased opinion, this story is right up there with Steven Moffat's seminal Continuity Errors in Virgin's Decalog 3: Consequences anthology in 1996. In both stories, the author just went completely bugnuts. And it worked magnificently. (Whatever happened to that Moffat guy, anyhow? He seemed talented...)

Anyhow, I am honoured to present to you Allyn Gibson's The Spindle *of* Necessity.

Keith RA DeCandido

The Spindle of Necessity
Allyn Gibson

An adventure of the Sixth Doctor

Introduction by Michaelean Ferguson, PhD

A cache of ancient papyri discovered during an archaeological dig in Serbia in March 2007 provided historians with their first look at the lost Aristotelian dialogue, 'Eudemus'. Though known as a writer of philosophical treatises, Aristotle also wrote a number of now-lost Socratic dialogues, and it was the treatises, thought to have come from lecture notes taken by students at his academy, the Lyceum, that were translated into Arabic and rediscovered by the West at the time of the Crusades. While the treatises reflect the division between Aristotle's mature philosophy and that of his teacher Plato, scholars believed the dialogues reflected the thinking of the young Aristotle, written in imitation of Plato's own dialogues.

The recovery of 'Eudemus, or On the Soul', presents a number of problems to the accepted understanding of Aristotle's works. By Socratic standards, the dialogue is unconventional. Traditionally, Socrates is present in the dialogue as the major participant, while Aristotle's 'Eudemus' occurs after Socrates's death and features Plato as its primary character. The Plato presented in 'Eudemus' differs markedly from the sage in the Aristotelian canon — one prone to doubt, flawed reasoning, and flights of fancy. Uncharacteristically, 'Eudemus' features several scenes, as one would find in a play. Perhaps, like Plato's sequence of dialogues covering the arrest and trial of Socrates, 'Eudemus' comprises several distinct works that follow in succession, with only the first entitled 'Eudemus'.

Unlike the Platonic dialogues, the titular character is not present throughout the work, disappearing halfway into the dialogue with no explanation. Rather, much of the interest of 'Eudemus' revolves around a character known only as 'the Doctor' instead of by a proper name. Who was this Doctor? 'Eudemus' describes a wise

man, seemingly ancient despite apparent youth. The dialogue makes no mention of a place of origin, and while the Doctor is met in ancient Egypt he seems to have retired there from places unknown. The Doctor is a singular character in the dialogue, prone to making bizarre claims about his nature, his life experiences, even his age. The Doctor's dialogue is insightful if somewhat fanciful, and he remains the unidentifiable enigma at the heart of 'Eudemus'.

The dialogue utilises concepts that were unknown at the time of the manuscript's composition. Some words are transliterated from the ancient Greek to English because we have no idea what Aristotle actually meant by them. Other words are translated to give a poetic flavour to the translation. Curiously, some words, if ordered differently, suggest theoretical concepts that would not be discovered for two millennia and, if placed into a modern context, would accurately describe a thoroughly modern understanding of the universe.

Despite these issues, the discovery of 'Eudemus' adds a new work to the Aristotelian canon. 'Eudemus' presents new insights into the biography of Plato and sheds light onto the mystery years of Plato's life in the immediate aftermath of Socrates's suicide.

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EUDEMUS, OR ON THE SOUL

i.

PLATO: The Egyptians are a strange people, civilised in their own way, but with a variety of gods and devils that would confuse even those of the Olympian pantheon. What knows Zeus of Osiris or Horus or Sutekh? These names confuse me, and we see them not in our histories of Atlantis or Troy.

EUDEMUS: Surely you know your Herodotus. Then you must know, friend Plato, that the Egyptians are an older people than we of Greece. Even our enemy, the Persians, have a history deeper than ours.

PLATO: True. Our Greek civilization is young compared to theirs, yet the Greek worships not the gods of the Persian or the Egyptian. Their gods are not our gods.

EUD.: Perhaps their gods are similar to ours, having the same wants and desires as our gods. Perhaps what we name Zeus the Egyptian names Osiris. Can these not be the same gods, merely under different names?

PLATO: I concede that you may be correct. Yet, consider the tales we heard days past, the stories of Atlantis and Troy. This storyteller knew Atlantis by the same name as we. He knew Troy by the same name as we. He is Egyptian. We are Greek. If we two peoples may know our histories by the same names, surely we must know the gods by the same names as well?

EUD.: Do we know our histories by the same name? Who is to say that the Egyptian did not hear the tale of Troy from a passing Greek? Did not Socrates's friend Critias learn the tale of Atlantis here in Egypt? We do not know that these histories exist independent of one another.

PLATO: Then these traditions do not exist separate from one another?

EUD.: I submit we cannot know for certain. If my supposition is correct, then both Greece and Egypt may in time have separate traditions of Atlantis and Troy as these stories are passed down from historian to student, generation to generation. Just as Critias told Socrates of Atlantis, and he taught you of Atlantis, so too will you teach another of Atlantis. Likewise, the Egyptian tells his student of Atlantis, and he will tell his student, and so on. Thus will two traditions form — one Greek, one Egyptian — of the same tale, yet both springing from a single source.

PLATO: Again, friend Eudemus, I must concede that you could be correct. Your supposition had not occurred to me.

EUD.: What seek we here, Plato?

PLATO: You know the Street of the Gods in Athens?

EUD.: I visit it often seeking knowledge.

PLATO: Have you found knowledge?

EUD.: On occasion.

PLATO: I must confess. I am not a pious man.

EUD.: Was that not the crime for which Socrates was put to death? The crime of impiety?

PLATO: It is.

EUD.: Then why have we come here?

PLATO: Knowledge. You sought knowledge from the oracles. Consider: How do we know that the Greek gods are true?

EUD.: They are true because we are taught they are true from our boyhood.

PLATO: You have never questioned the truth you are taught.

EUD.: I have not.

PLATO: Have you reason for believing the Greek but not the Egyptian?

EUD.: I have been taught the Greek is true. Of the Egyptian I have been taught nothing. Therefore, I do not know whether the Egyptian may be true or not.

PLATO: Because you have not been taught?

EUD.: Because their gods are unknown to me.

PLATO: Shall we not listen to these mystics, then? Perhaps we may learn something from them.

EUD.: Why should we listen to this mystic's tale? Does a tale of a prophet named Issek tortured on wooden racks for venerating his god with pottery further our knowledge?

PLATO: Is knowledge not its own end?

EUD.: What good is it to have knowledge if one does not act upon that knowledge or if the knowledge is not useful? I may know the numbers of stars in the sky or grains of sand in the ocean, but how is such knowledge to my benefit? Likewise, I may know how to stop the bleeding of a wound, but unless I am called upon to use that knowledge it is useless to me.

PLATO: You raise valid questions, friend Eudemus. Must knowledge have a use to be valuable, or may knowledge as an abstract have value?

EUD.: I submit that the former has greater weight than the latter. Utility is more important than the theory.

PLATO: Consider this mystic.

EUD.: This old man? He appears feeble and is strangely attired for an Egyptian. Yet he is clean-shaven in their style, and his white hair is pulled back in an unusual fashion. His hand bears a blue ring. Why should I consider him?

PLATO: He claims to be a magician.

EUD.: Have we not magicians in Athens?

PLATO: We do. Yet his Egyptian magic may be different than the Greek. We should observe then consider whether he may impart knowledge.

EUD.: We shall do as you suggest.

MAGICIAN: Travellers! What do you seek?

PLATO: You are a magician?

MAGICIAN: I am. I have powers over both life and death. Shall I demonstrate?

EUD.: We should like that.

MAGICIAN: I shall restore this dead creature to life. This morning it was a living chicken. Now, it is a lifeless object. Do you agree?

PLATO: By my sight it is dead.

MAGICIAN: Then I shall build a box on this table. Observe as I place my panels as such. Now I place the lifeless thing within its sides. Now I seal it with this lid. Observe! Is the box sealed?

EUD.: The box is sealed.

MAGICIAN: Then I shall utter the words that have been passed down from master to pupil for generations and restore this dead creature to life. Damvar! Allocar! Razzam!

EUD.: The smoke! The flash flight! How have you done this?

MAGICIAN: Observe, friends! The lifeless creature breathes again!

PLATO: A spry creature it is indeed, magician. Shall we catch it before it vanishes into the crowd?

MAGICIAN: It concerns me not. I can buy another. You are Greeks?

EUD.: We come from Athens.

MAGICIAN: Why do two Greeks venture so far into Egypt?

PLATO: We seek a magician and the knowledge he offers.

MAGICIAN: How may this humble servant be of assistance?

PLATO: How did you learn this ability, to restore dead creatures to life?

MAGICIAN: It is a secret passed down through time. I have travelled far, I have seen much, I have learned much in my journeys. Now I am old and weary. I no longer wish to journey as I did in younger days. I wish merely for the chance to offer my abilities to those in need of them.

PLATO: Eudemus and I have undertaken a quest. I seek to return one of the dead to the realm of the living.

MAGICIAN: You wish to bring a man back from the dead?

PLATO: I do.

MAGICIAN: What you seek will be most difficult, perhaps even beyond my meagre abilities. The animals are easy. But a man? I make no guarantees. Nor will my fee be insignificant for the service.

PLATO: I would expect no less.

STRANGER: Keep your money where it is, Athenian. The only guarantee you shall receive from this charlatan is that a fool and his money are easily parted.

MAGICIAN: Charlatan? Surely not! Who are you to accuse me thus? You disrupt a business transaction made in good faith.

STRANGER: Good faith? You engage in trickery and call it ‘good faith’? Your definition is lacking.

MAGICIAN: I restored life to the chicken. How can I be a ‘charlatan’ when I do as I say I would do?

STRANGER: You no more brought that chicken back to life than I

am the Pharaoh.

PLATO: Yet I saw this magician take a lifeless chicken and restore it to life.

STRANGER: What you saw was nothing more than a cheap parlour trick. One performed poorly at that.

MAGICIAN: Lies!

STRANGER: Observe, Greeks. I topple his table.

EUD.: A false bottom!

STRANGER: Indeed. Sleight of hand. The cloth covered a false bottom beneath the tabletop, and the pyrotechnic display masked the substitution of the live chicken held beneath the table for the dead chicken in the box above. Am I correct, magician?

MAGICIAN: I admit nothing.

STRANGER: See, Greeks? His own words condemn him. When confronted with his own perfidy he cannot admit to his actions.

PLATO: You have saved me from a mistake, stranger.

STRANGER: It is nothing.

EUD.: Should we stop the charlatan as he runs? Should we not report him to the officials?

STRANGER: Whatever for, Athenian? Look about you. All these vendors are charlatans of one form or another, selling their wares to the unwary, taking the money and baubles of the poor, claiming they can work magic. The only difference about this magician is that he was caught in his activities. You will not see him tomorrow, I wager, but come again in two days and you will find him here, this very spot, performing the same trick, dazzling the same audience. The officials have better things to do than to pursue such a pointless crime.

PLATO: You are cynical, stranger.

STRANGER: I have seen too much to be anything but cynical.

PLATO: Where are you from? You are clearly not an Egyptian. Neither do you have the air of the Greek or the Persian about you. Nor can I place your accent.

STRANGER: Do not mistake my prevention of a grievous error on your part with any desire to engage with you in conversation on mine.

PLATO: Will you at least accept our thanks? You have saved us from squandering our funds on this charlatan and his tricks.

STRANGER: Unnecessary. Not everyone has a careful eye along the bazaar. What things appear to be and what they are differ markedly. Keep your wits about you.

PLATO: I am on a quest to gain knowledge. I could use someone with your wisdom.

STRANGER: You are Plato. You have wisdom enough of your own.

PLATO: You know my name, stranger. Will you at least tell me yours?

STRANGER: I am known as the Doctor.

ii.

EUDEMUS: Why have we returned to the bazaar, friend Plato?

PLATO: Perhaps we shall find the Doctor here amidst the patrons of the street.

EUD.: Why do we seek him?

PLATO: I believe he would be of invaluable help in our quest.

EUD.: To bring a man back from the dead?

PLATO: The same.

EUD.: Has man ever returned from the dead?

PLATO: Consider what Socrates spoke to Cebes on the eve of his death on the subject of the soul. ‘There comes into my mind an ancient doctrine which affirms that they’ — it is the soul here that Socrates speaks of— ‘go from hence into the other world, and returning hither, are born again from the dead. Now if it be true that the living come from the dead, then our souls must exist in the other world, for if not, how could they have been born again?’

EUD.: How can we know that Socrates’s proposition is correct?

PLATO: Does not the maggot come from the decaying body? Does not the butterfly come from the dying caterpillar?

EUD.: These are true.

PLATO: Can we not say that life comes from lifelessness, a great cycle from birth to death to rebirth?

EUD.: Let me ask you this — whence goes the soul after death?

PLATO: If the gods dwell in the heavens, as our myths tell us, then I submit that the soul must ascend into the heavens to rejoin with the gods that created it. Upon rebirth, the soul returns from the heavens and is reborn to the infant to grow into adulthood.

EUD.: Your conclusion leaves me uncertain. It does not seem provable to me. At most we can say that in some circumstances life comes from lifelessness. Nor can we say for certain that souls ascend and descend. I am uncertain if we can say that the process that creates maggots and butterflies from the dead is the same process that gives to an infant a soul that had once been in a man.

PLATO: I accept your uneasiness. But consider! Did not the

magician say in days past that he had seen much in his travels? Can we not say that his knowledge may be greater in areas than our knowledge?

EUD.: We can say that. But was he not unmasked as a trickster? How can we say that what he purported to be knowledge was in fact truth? If his demonstration was a lie, then how can we know that he knows anything that was not also a lie?

PLATO: He was indeed a trickster. One can only trick the unwary, therefore the magician must have knowledge greater than those who would observe him. Indeed, did not the magician trick us, and were we not wary? If he could trick us, surely his knowledge in some areas surpasses ours. Can we not say that the man who revealed the trickery must have a knowledge even greater than the trickster?

EUD.: I believe we can say this. The Doctor saw through the trickery where we did not.

PLATO: For that very reason we seek the Doctor. He knows things we do not know. He can help us to answer Socrates's maxim.

EUD.: Is that not the Doctor?

PLATO: It appears so. Look at how he towers above the others on the street. Look at his long blond hair and how it falls curling across his shoulders. Only one so secure in himself would allow himself to be seen in such an unkempt fashion and in such garish attire.

EUD.: Observe, friend Plato. Does it not appear that the Doctor himself seeks knowledge from the priests? Then may he lack the knowledge you seek?

PLATO: Yet did we not days past observe the magician to gain knowledge? Even Socrates, despite knowing much, did not know all. Can we not presume that the Doctor, too, knows much but not all?

EUD.: We may presume that.

PLATO: Let us hear the things the Doctor hears and gain knowledge of our own.

PRIEST: The word of the mighty Osiris, whose word is truth, has passed from generation to generation. Today I speak the story of the extinction of the Utchat, what we call the Eye of Horus, and of the dimming of the moon on the day that the two brothers, Horus and Sutekh, met in battle. The mighty Sutekh, god of the desert, murdered the father Osiris. His brother Horus, god of the sky, sought revenge for their father's murder and challenged Sutekh to combat for their father's body. In the Valley of the Kings they met, in the shadows of the Pyramids. Sutekh called upon the desert and a mighty sandstorm blotted out both sun and sky, depriving Horus of his powers.

PLATO: What is this, Doctor? Is this an Egyptian myth?

DOCTOR: It is a story from the *Book of the Dead.*

PRIEST: Judging Sutekh to have an advantage in the battle, Thoth came and removed an eye of Horus as both eyes were clouded by Sutekh's storms. 'I remove the thundercloud from the sky when there is a thunderstorm,' spoke Thoth. The storm raged at the thundercloud that Sutekh sent forth against the Eye of Ra, the sun itself. Thoth banished the thundercloud from Ra's eye, and he returned the Eye — living and healthy and cleansed, perfect and without defect — to Horus. The thunderclouds henceforth came from a sickness in the heart of the Eye of Ka as it wept for its companion eye, that of the Moon. Thus is the Moon dimmer than the sun, for it was taken from Horus and then returned. Such is the word of the mighty Osiris whose word is truth. PLATO: What manner of story is this?

DOCTOR: You have heard a tale, Athenian, that explains what the Egyptians believe about the sun and the moon. Horus and Ka, these are sun gods. In some legends they are different, while in other legends they are the same. The eyes of Horus are the sun and the moon. Sutekh dimmed both eyes. The sun is the eye removed by Thoth, the moon is the uncleansed eye. This is the mythology these

people hold, this is their explanation for the universe.

EUD.: Is it true?

DOCTOR: Is it any more true than your mythology of Apollo? Do you look upon the sun and say, ‘That is the god Apollo as his chariot races through the skies’?

EUD.: There are many who do say such.

DOCTOR: Do you?

EUD.: It is what I believe.

DOCTOR: Do you also believe, Plato?

PLATO: I believe there are gods who dwell upon the heavens. Does that mean I look upon the sun and see Apollo? Does that mean I look upon the moon and see Artemis? I do not know.

DOCTOR: Why do you doubt?

PLATO: Our myths tell us the gods influence the affairs of man. Yet the sun and the moon are inactive, and beyond the measurement of time they have no influence upon our lives.

DOCTOR: That is a good reason.

PLATO: I must also consider this tale we have just heard. The Greek believes that the sun and the moon are gods. The Egyptian believes that the sun and the moon are the eyes of a god. Both stories cannot be true. DOCTOR: Why must either be true? Could not the truth be a tale you have not yet heard?

PLATO: I confess, Doctor, I do know.

DOCTOR: You sought me out, Plato. I would know why.

PLATO: I have need of your wisdom.

DOCTOR: I am flattered. Why do you say I have wisdom?

PLATO: Your eyes are old, yet you appear no older than I.

DOCTOR: Why would you say I am no older than you?

PLATO: Your hair is blond, curly, and long. Your beard is dark, though still blond. Neither are streaked through with the white hairs acquired with age. Nor is your face weathered and wrinkled. I submit that you have seen no more than thirty-five years.

DOCTOR: I have seen many times those number of years.

EUD.: By your appearance, surely not.

DOCTOR: Appearances may deceive the senses.

PLATO: That is true. Socrates taught our bodies are merely imperfect vessels. He also taught that the soul may return to live again. Could your soul have been reborn with a new vessel to bear it?

DOCTOR: I have only ever been the Doctor. I have never been another.

PLATO: How may your soul be older than your body, then?

DOCTOR: You know the butterfly?

EUD.: We do.

DOCTOR: Does not the butterfly begin life as another creature, the caterpillar?

EUD.: It does.

DOCTOR: Could not the same be possible for me? Might I have stages of life where, like the caterpillar, I transform into the butterfly?

PLATO: I have never known a man to transform in such a manner.

DOCTOR: The infant becomes the child. The child becomes the youth. The youth becomes the man. Are these not distinct stages of life? Are these not transformations?

PLATO: They are. Yet I know of no transformation, save death and decay, after the youth becomes a man.

DOCTOR: Perhaps I am not a man.

EUD.: You have the shape of a man. You have the speech of a man.

DOCTOR: Yet, do you not agree that appearances may deceive? Are not your senses imperfect because they are physical and thus limited?

PLATO: I do. They are.

DOCTOR: Then must something that appears as a man be a man?

PLATO: No. The gods appear as men though they are not men.

DOCTOR: That is a good example.

PLATO: Then you are a god?

DOCTOR: I have met your gods, Plato. I am not a god.

EUD.: The gods? Are they like men, but not?

DOCTOR: If you mean, do the gods resemble men in countenance, then the answer is yes. If you mean, do the gods resemble men in personality, vanity, and weakness, then that answer, too, is yes. The gods are to us as we are to an insect. They are no more aware of us than we are of the fly. Do not look to your gods, Plato, for they have no interest in you.

PLATO: My only interest in the gods is to answer the challenge of Socrates.

DOCTOR: Which challenge is that?

PLATO: Socrates said that he knew that he did not know. I, too, know that there are things I do not know. Therefore, I shall find the answers to the questions I have not yet asked because I do not know yet to ask them.

DOCTOR: How shall you find those answers?

PLATO: I shall ask the gods myself.

DOCTOR: How would you ask the gods? Climb Mount Olympus? If you wish to do so you should never have left Greece.

PLATO: The gods do not reside on Mount Olympus.

DOCTOR: Your mythologies state that they do.

PLATO: The mythologies are incorrect.

DOCTOR: If not Mount Olympus, then where?

PLATO: I seek the *axis mundi.*

DOCTOR: The axis of the world. The spindle on which the heavens turn. Why?

PLATO: I intend to find the *axis,* scale it into the heavens, and look upon the gods themselves.

DOCTOR: Do not the Greeks believe that the *axis mundi* is Mount Olympus itself?

PLATO: The *axis mundi* cannot be Mount Olympus as the heavens do not revolve around Mount Olympus. Therefore, Mount Olympus cannot be the spindle upon which the heavens turn.

DOCTOR: I will agree, the heavens do not rotate around an axis through Mount Olympus. Why do you believe there is an *axis*

mundi?

PLATO: I am told, by those who know such things, the heavens revolve around a point in space to the north. I have no reason to doubt them. I am no astronomer.

DOCTOR: I assure you that your astronomers have told you truth. There is an axis, and from our perspective here in Egypt it lies to the north.

EUD.: You are certain?

DOCTOR: You have seen the Pyramids?

PLATO: Herodotus wrote of them. I have seen no feat of human endeavour so magnificent in my life. I cannot imagine the labour and expertise that went into their construction. How would one even conceive of such a thing?

DOCTOR: A man much as you conceived of such a thing as the Pyramids. While the methods may be beyond your understanding, be assured that the methods were understood and known by those who used them.

PLATO: No man may know everything, that is true. I need not have the expertise to build the Pyramids because I have no need to build the Pyramids, yet there are those who do know because they needed to know.

DOCTOR: Precisely.

EUD.: I must ask, why do you bring up the Pyramids? I fail to see their relevance to the *axis mundi.*

DOCTOR: Would it interest you to know that the Great Pyramid, the largest and most impressive of the Pyramids in the Valley of Kings, is oriented to the celestial north? The Egyptians have astronomical knowledge that far outstrips the Greeks'. The north face of the pyramid directly faces the north pole. It is about that point in space that the heavens turn.

PLATO: Would it not stand to reason that if there is a point in the northern sky about which the heavens turn then there must be a point in the southern sky as well? The Pythagoreans claim the Earth is round, and if so then an axis through the Earth on which the heavens turn must terminate at points both north and south.

DOCTOR: Well reasoned.

PLATO: If the heavens turn about this axis through the Earth, then would it not stand to reason that the *axis mundi* would be located both north and south? Could we not reach the pole — the word I believed you used — and there find the *axis mundi,* the spindle on which the heavens turn?

DOCTOR: Your reasoning is not without merit, Plato, but I must ask you. Assuming you could find the *axis mundi* what would you expect to find there?

PLATO: I would expect to find a route into the heavens. A hill, an incline, perhaps even a tower. The heavens must rest upon some support. One could scale the support, reach the heavens, and speak with the gods.

DOCTOR: Pardon my amusement, but I have not heard such folly in five hundred years! I knew a man — a thief by trade — who described you as a moron. Socrates, too, for that matter, and your pupil Aristotle.

PLATO: Aristotle? I am unfamiliar with the name.

DOCTOR: You have yet to meet him.

PLATO: We are all morons, so says this man?

DOCTOR: I have seen little to convince me otherwise.

PLATO: You think my plan folly?

DOCTOR: It is madness. You proceed on the assumption that there

is an *axis mundi* to find. Have you ever met a traveller who has spoken of it in his travels? Have you any reason beyond myth to believe it exists? You could search the Earth a dozen lifetimes, Plato, and never find what you seek.

EUD.: Is not Plato's reasoning sound?

DOCTOR: His reasoning for its location is sound. His reasoning for its existence is not.

PLATO: Unless I see for myself, how may I be certain?

DOCTOR: You wish to speak with gods. You sought to hire a magician to restore a man from the dead. What is it you seek, Plato? What do you think the gods can give you?

PLATO: If my master Socrates was correct in believing himself to possess a soul, indestructible, and if, upon his death, his soul was freed from the confines of his physical body and returned to the heavens, could I not induce the gods to return his soul to Earth in a new form? Could I not bring the wisdom of Socrates back from the heavens? Is this not a worthy goal?

DOCTOR: A worthy goal? How can you believe any of that? I thought Socrates taught you a life of reason, but this goal of yours is a life of madness! Where is your reasoning, Plato?

PLATO: Did Socrates not say that the soul, coming as it does from the divine, is both eternal and immortal? Did Socrates not say that the body, composed as it is of the physical elements, is impure and thus inferior of the divine? Did not Socrates say that the soul, once freed of the constraints of the physical body, would return to its divine state, to be reborn in a new body?

DOCTOR: Socrates said all of these things, but that does not make them right. I could say that the Earth is a cube, but that would not make it so.

PLATO: Yet Socrates's reasoning is logical.

DOCTOR: I said to a young woman many years from now, ‘Logic merely enables one to be wrong with authority.’ Your logic is specious. You assume facts not in evidence. You draw conclusions from those assumed facts that cannot be borne.

PLATO: What facts are those, Doctor?

DOCTOR: You assume the mind has an existence separate from the body.

PLATO: How can it not? From cadavers we know that blood comes from the heart, that air comes into the lungs, that food goes into the stomach. Can you point to an organ and say, ‘This produces the soul’?

DOCTOR: What of the brain? Did not Alcmaeon the Pythagorean suggest the brain as the seat of intelligence?

PLATO: Yet it appears to do nothing. When I love, I feel it in my heart. When I hunger, I feel it in my stomach. When I thirst, I feel it in my mouth. When I tire, I feel it in my eyes. If the brain seats intelligence, should I not feel these sensations in the brain instead of the body? Yet the brain produces no sensation save one, that of pain.

DOCTOR: Just because you cannot observe a thing does not make it so.

PLATO: Nor do your assertions that I am incorrect make them so. If I am wrong, prove to me that I am wrong. But merely tell me that I am wrong? Where is your authority in such matters? My logic would suffice for Socrates and he was the best and wisest man I have ever known. Should that not suffice for you?

DOCTOR: If I could offer you proofs you would understand I would. If I could offer you reasons you would accept I would give them. I have neither to offer. I have only the experience of lifetimes. You say I have old eyes. Is it not possible that they have seen more than you imagine?

PLATO: You have old eyes, true, but even the wonders you have seen do not dissuade me from my course. I seek the *axis mundi* and an audience with the gods.

DOCTOR: You mean to go, then?

PLATO: Nothing you have said convinces me I am wrong.

DOCTOR: If that is your decision, then I shall accompany you if you will have me.

PLATO: But you have called my plans madness?

DOCTOR: How could I refuse such a quest? I have walked halfway across the world and seen the wonders of China. I have seen three suns rise at dawn. I have witnessed the births of stars and the deaths of planets. If you mean to do this, then I see little choice. I will go with you in search of the *axis mundi.* An adventure into the unknown? I am drawn to that as a moth is drawn to flame.

EUD.: Why the change of heart?

DOCTOR: We all have our destinies. If Plato wishes to return and fulfil his destiny, he could have no better companion than I. Some of us have seen our destinies. I will help him find the *axis mundi.*

iii.

PLATO: Sailing master, what make you of this weather?

PYRRHO: I have been a trade ship master for many years, Master Plato, and I have never seen seas so calm and wind so perfect. If I did not know better I would say that the gods themselves had blessed us on our journey.

PLATO: You do not believe in the gods, Master Pyrrho?

PYRRHO: I have travelled to many places and seen many things in my thirty years at sea. The gods never explained anything, they were merely stories, and I have seen nothing I could not take for

natural.

PLATO: But what of that storm to the south? Is that natural?

PYRRHO: I do not know. It concerns your friend the Doctor greatly. He has stood at the bow all night. Even in our near-moonless sky the clouds could be seen. He watched them.

PLATO: We make good time towards them. They grow swiftly in our approach.

PYRRHO: Forty days have passed since we left Ethiopia. Since the shores fell from view we have not sighted land. For eight days the sky has been cloudless, and though the ocean has been calm strong winds drive us south. Though unnatural to you, I have experienced them before and they hold no terrors for me. Those clouds to the south, however, are unlike anything I have seen. They concern me as well.

PLATO: They have grown much since last night? I must confess, I have not the mind for such observations.

PYRRHO: They have indeed grown much overnight. Though I have not asked him, I believe that has concerned the Doctor greatly and has prompted his vigil at the ship's bow.

PLATO: He has seen much, and he may have experience with such things.

PYRRHO: I should tell you, Master Plato, the crew grows restless. I have heard rumours of mutiny.

PLATO: Then let us hope that the Doctor offers insight into these ill-looking clouds and matters aboard ship do not reach such an end.

DOCTOR: Nine hundred years, and I have never seen clouds the like of these. Grey-green they are, billowing much as a storm cloud, yet they have not the movement of a summer storm. Instead, they seem painted on the sky like a fixed thing, and as we approach they grow larger in our sight. Was it not at dusk that they were merely a hand

in height from the horizon? Now they reach a third of the way to the zenith. As we sail further south, the more these clouds loom larger above us. In mere hours they will blot the sun from our sight.

PLATO: Did you not think this voyage was folly?

DOCTOR: You run from your past, do you not? Your master Socrates lies dead, the winds of politics in Athens shift, and you are no longer welcome there, correct?

PLATO: These things are true. Do you also run, hence your reluctance? You feared that this journey would bring to mind events long buried in your psyche?

DOCTOR: I too run, Plato, but not from my past. It is my psyche that concerns me. Things dwell within my mind I wish I did not know. You run from your past, and in time the winds will shift in Athens once more and you will return and escape your past. I run from something else. I run from my future, and I will never escape it.

PLATO: No man knows the future, despite what the oracles of the Street of the Gods in Athens may believe and proclaim to the gullible.

DOCTOR: I have met my future. A dark and evil future it was. Curiosity and nobility were replaced with arrogance and greed. Compassion was replaced with indifference. How could a soul become so corrupt? How could a life dedicated to justice become so chaotic?

PLATO: Your words are incomprehensible. You cannot speak of yourself, surely? While I do not believe entirely that you, like a caterpillar, may transform into a new form, do you suggest that you will become something different and anathemetical to everything that you are?

DOCTOR: I do not suggest it, Plato. I have met the man I will become. I looked into his eyes, I saw the twisted thing I shall become. With every fibre of my being I reject the Valeyard and all

he stands for, yet as surely as day becomes night I shall, in the fullness of time, meet my destiny as the Valeyard. I hide from that destiny, Plato. Why should I go forward in all my beliefs when I know some day I shall reject every belief I hold dear?

PLATO: How can you look into another's eyes and see what you will become? I do not understand.

DOCTOR: Are we not sailing across the seas? Are we not moving from one point to another?

PLATO: We are.

DOCTOR: Imagine time is but another sea. Just as this boat sails from Ethiopia to unknown shores imagine there are ships that sail from tomorrow into yesterday.

PLATO: You suggest that time itself is like the sea? That one can move from place to place in time, from the time of Atlantis to times yet to be, just as one can move from place to place on this Earth?

DOCTOR: I say the very thing.

PLATO: I cannot conceive of a vessel that could traverse the seas of time.

DOCTOR: Neither could you conceive of how the Pyramids were constructed, yet they were conceived by the mind of man and built by the hands of man.

PLATO: Yet no sight could convince me that one might journey into the future or past.

DOCTOR: Perhaps not. I could tell you of engineering stars and eyes of harmony, yet these words would mean nothing to you. Some things must be taken on faith instead of reason and experience. Experience tells you I have an ancient soul and a young body. My offered explanation is one you either accept on faith or reject on reason.

PLATO: But how can you say that you could look into this Valeyard's eyes and see your own future? He cannot be you.

DOCTOR: I tell you that he is. I travel in time, Plato. Just as we sail across this sea, I have traversed the vortex of time. On occasion I have met myself in defiance of the laws of time. My people captured me and placed me on trial. The Valeyard was the prosecutor, and the fate of my soul was at stake. Imagine that, to be prosecuted by the evil, twisted being I am to become! I triumphed and defeated the Valeyard's plan to possess my soul, but in so doing I came away with the certain knowledge of my own doom. In time, I will be that Valeyard. I will prosecute myself for crimes never committed. No man can escape his destiny.

PLATO: I do not understand your tale, Doctor, but did you not say in Egypt that you were not a man? Men have destinies, they are determined by the Fates. If you are not a man, perhaps you may escape your destiny.

DOCTOR: I applaud your optimism, but it is misplaced. I will not escape my fate, just as we will not escape this oncoming storm.

PLATO: Why do you say that?

DOCTOR: Do you not see it? There, on the horizon? A land I know cannot exist.

PLATO: Then how can it be here?

DOCTOR: Something has drawn us here, Plato, and we meet our destiny on these unknown shores.

iv.

PLATO: Why did you order the ship to sail back to Ethiopia? You have stranded us in an unknown land with no means to return.

DOCTOR: By rights this land should not exist. We sailed due south from Ethiopia. What verdant plain is this? Where are the glaciers? Whatever force brought us here and created this land will hold the

power to return us to Greece.

PLATO: Stormclouds rage overhead, yet they bring no rain, and Master Pyrrho's crew thought them unnatural. If these clouds are unnatural, could not this land be unnatural as well? Could the *axis mundi* be here?

DOCTOR: Is that reason or hope, Plato?

PLATO: Perhaps both? Perhaps this unnatural land is the base of the *axis mundi* and from it rises the Spindle of Necessity. Can we not say that air is a fluid like water? If the spheres of the heavens turn on the Spindle, then might the turning of the spheres churn the air as a stone tossed in a pond churns the water? Could not this storm be produced by the very forces that turn the sky about us each day? If I am correct, then these oppressive clouds must hide the *axis mundi* from our vision. If they would clear we could see our way into the heavens and the gods themselves.

DOCTOR: If you are correct and a spindle rises through the clouds to rotate the heavens about us, then yes, a coriolis effect as you describe would disrupt the atmosphere and cause the storms about us.

PLATO: Is this storm not the proof we seek? Does this not confirm that the spindle exists?

DOCTOR: You have no proof, merely a theory that aligns with the facts. But I tell you, I have seen the Earth from the heavens. No spindle rises, nor do the heavens rest upon pillars. The stars and planets do not turn on spheres about the Earth. The Earth is not the centre of the universe. The Earth is but an object in space, just as the sun and the moon and the stars are all objects in space, as solid as the Earth. That is why this I name this quest folly, because it is predicated on assumptions of the universal nature that are demonstrably false.

PLATO: Do you not see them? Do you not hear them?

DOCTOR: I see nothing. I hear nothing. Plato, why are you

kneeling? What are these shapes arising from the mists? You three are women, taller than I am by half, suffused with an unearthly glow. What are you?

FIRST: Do you not recognise us?

SECOND: We have watched over you through time and space.

THIRD: You cannot escape us.

DOCTOR: Why do I hear ethereal echoes in your voices as though your words were everywhere and nowhere? Why do I hear in your words the language of Gallifrey?

FIRST: You are the one we sought, Doctor.

SECOND: Plato was merely a convenient actor to draw you into our drama.

THIRD: We are the Fates, and you must embrace your destiny.

DOCTOR: I do not accept you. You cannot be what you claim to be!

CLOTHO (FIRST): I remember your birth, Time Lord. I spun the cords of your life. I remember your mother. I placed my hand upon her swollen belly. I ran my fingers across her red hair. She was quite beautiful.

LACHESIS (SECOND): I measured out the cords of your lives. Some of the cords were long. Some were short. Some cords, Time Lord, are mysterious even to me for their endings and beginnings even I cannot see.

ATROPOS (THIRD): I have cut the cords of your life many times. I have many cords yet to cut. You cannot escape your destiny by hiding in this time and place.

DOCTOR: No! I have seen my destiny, and I refuse it!

LACHESIS: You would turn your back upon the man you once were, upon all the deeds you have accomplished? Why reject the man you are?

DOCTOR: I have lived my life for justice, and I will not see that life corrupted! I have seen the man I shall become, and I would rather turn my back on the life I have led than allow that man to come to be.

CLOTHO: What could we say to convince you otherwise?

DOCTOR: There is nothing you can say. I wish to live my remaining years in a life of tranquility!

LACHESIS: Then observe, Doctor. Arise, Plato and awake! Your quest is at its end.

PLATO: What has happened? Who are these women?

DOCTOR: They claim to be the Fates, Plato, unlikely though I find their claim.

PLATO: Observe, Doctor. The clouds above us part. What is that becoming clear to my sight in the mists? A mountain rising into the sky, stretching into infinity? Nothing I have ever seen has risen into the sky as does that spire. Fates, I ask you! What is that?

CLOTHO: The mountain is the *axis mundi,* Plato. The spire you see is the Spindle of Necessity rising into the heavens.

LACHESIS: Did you not seek this?

PLATO: I did, Fates, but such was not the entirety of my quest.

ATROPOS: No, Plato, it was not. And so we shall fulfil it for you now.

PLATO: Doctor, we are flying!

CLOTHO: We ascend into the spheres of the heavens, Plato.

DOCTOR: How is this possible? This is beyond all my experience.

LACHESIS: What do your senses tell you?

DOCTOR: My senses tell me that I rise into the sky. But I know that the senses may deceive. As my senses tell me things I know cannot be true, I must conclude that you deceive my senses.

CLOTHO: Can you not accept that your senses do not lie?

DOCTOR: I trust my senses, Fates, but I harbour a healthy scepticism.

LACHESIS: As all should, Doctor. Do we not approach the moon? If we were to step upon the moon might you believe the experience of your senses instead of the preconceptions of your mind?

DOCTOR: They are not preconceptions. Rather, they are knowledge based upon the experience of nine hundred years.

ATROPOS: Step with us onto the moon and decide.

PLATO: What is this place, Fates?

LACHESIS: You have seen the moon in the sky, yes? You stand upon the moon. Look into the sky and see the Earth. See, there? Greece. There? Egypt. There? Persia. No living man has ever had your perspective upon the Earth, Plato.

PLATO: The Earth appears to be curved, as if a ball in space, just as the Pythagoreans believe. Those pillars extending outward from the world from top to bottom must be the Spindles rising from the *axis mundi.*

LACHESIS: Indeed. They are the pillars upon which the heavens turn. The planets, the sun, the moon, the stars, each on its own sphere, turning in its own time and manner. Look to the west. What do you see?

PLATO: That bright light. That cannot be the sun, surely?

CLOTHO: It is, indeed.

PLATO: It appears so different.

DOCTOR: You see the light of the sun from an angle. Its light shines not on you but on the Earth below. Is that not right, Fates?

ATROPOS: Correct.

DOCTOR: I have walked upon the moon many times. It never looked thus. Is that not an edge I see? Does it not appear that we stand within a convex bowl? Were I to walk the edge, would I fall into space? Will you come with me, Plato, and see what lies beyond the moon's limb?

PLATO: We are the first to set foot upon the moon. Who would believe this?

DOCTOR: I would not believe this. Even now I am not certain to trust my senses. Here we stand at the edge of the moon. I peer over the edge and I see the stars below. If I step out beyond the limb of the moon, what will my feet land upon? Will I fall out into space and drift for eternity? What do you think, Plato?

PLATO: Do not do it, Doctor!

DOCTOR: I have no fear. I have seen my destiny, and I know my lives do not end in the empty void of this time and place. I step out, and — Look at this, Plato! I stand upon what seems to be open space! Come, Plato! You can walk upon open space as well. I look down at my feet and see stars below. I stand upon the inner surface of the moon's sphere, something I know to be impossible. Will not Claudius Ptolemy write that the planets and stars are fixed upon crystal spheres turning about the Earth?

CLOTHO: Why should the heavens not revolve around the Earth?

LACHESIS: Why should the universe as you know it remain fixed

so?

DOCTOR: I walked the sands of worlds in galaxies beyond sight and mind. I have flown through supernovae. I have witnessed the birth of planets. The universe is vast beyond the comprehension of the mind. Yet if I stand upon the inner surface of the moon's crystal sphere then the universe cannot be so vast as I know it to be. The universe cannot reconfigure itself on such massive scale. A geocentric universe cannot become a cosmos in which Earth is merely one mote in the eternal night.

CLOTHO: Let us visit Mars, and perhaps you will reconsider the experience of your senses.

LACHESIS: Look about you, Doctor. Is this the Mars you know?

DOCTOR: This is a formless red plain, Fates. Where are the mountains? Where are the vast cities?

PLATO: This is such a smaller place than the moon. I could walk from one edge to its opposite number in minutes, whereas on the moon it would have required an hour. In the sky the Earth is much smaller than it was before, and the sun, now further off, is much dimmed.

DOCTOR: The Fates claim this place is Mars.

PLATO: I would not have thought of the planets as a place in the sky. They appear so small, just points of light like the fixed stars. Yet I can see the reason. If the Earth is so small from here, then so too would this small island in the cosmos be a small point of light when seen from Greece.

DOCTOR: But what of the people who should live here, Plato? I know the peoples who dwell here. Theirs is a noble civilization, predating man's by millennia. This is not the Mars I have seen flowering in springtime. I do not know this place.

CLOTHO: What of you, Plato? What do you think of this place?

PLATO: Are the other wandering stars places such as this?

LACHESIS: Not all of them. Do you see that one, far to the east?

PLATO: It is bright, almost as a sun itself.

ATROPOS: That is Saturn.

PLATO: Why do you show Saturn to me?

CLOTHO: There we shall find the souls of the departed.

DOCTOR: How can we find the soul of a dead man on Saturn?

ATROPOS: When I cut the thread of life, the soul is drawn back into the heavens and towards its home on Saturn. The light of all souls that dwell there make Saturn luminous.

CLOTHO: Come, Plato, let us find your master Socrates.

PLATO: I have never seen a city the likes of this! No city in Greece or Egypt could be so magical. The people, are they souls of the deceased?

ATROPOS: Many are.

CLOTHO: Others have yet to be born.

DOCTOR: Why do they glow?

LACHESIS: You see the life-energy within the souls, not the souls themselves. The formless souls you see are not yet born. The formed souls are the deceased, and their souls are shaped by the form of the bodies they occupied in life.

PLATO: What of my master, Socrates? Will I recognise him?

ATROPOS: Who is this soul here?

PLATO: Master? Is it you?

SOUL: How have you come here?

PLATO: I sought to prove your final lesson.

SOUL / SOCRATES: On the immortality of the soul?

PLATO: The same.

SOCRATES: Why?

PLATO: Because I have come to understand that logic and reason are not all that defines human existence and the universe. One must gain experience from the world rather than reason alone.

SOCRATES: There may be reason in your words. Shall we discuss them?

PLATO: We shall, master, but can you pardon me for a moment?

SOCRATES: We have all the time in the world.

PLATO: Fates, may I return to the Earth with Socrates's soul?

CLOTHO: In the fullness of time, perhaps. But not today. His time is not yet come.

PLATO: Then I would beg your leave to allow me to remain here with my master for a time so that I might learn from him, and thence return with his wisdom to a world sorely in need of it.

LACHESIS: We shall permit this. Whether it is one year or five, we shall allow you the time you require and then return you to your place in Greece where you shall fulfil your destiny.

PLATO: I thank you, Fates. I must also thank you, Doctor, for coming so far on this journey.

DOCTOR: You will be happy here?

PLATO: For a time, yes. And you? What shall you do?

DOCTOR: That is in the Fates' hands. May you escape your past, Plato.

PLATO: May you escape your future, Doctor.

DOCTOR: Fates! Have you more to show me?

CLOTHO: We do, Doctor.

LACHESIS: Do you wish to see it?

ATROPOS: You will want to know.

DOCTOR: Know what?

LACHESIS: What lies beyond the stars, Doctor.

DOCTOR: Beyond the stars?

ATROPOS: Let us stand on the sphere of the stars.

LACHESIS: From here the Earth is merely another light in the sky.

CLOTHO: What lies beneath your feet, Doctor?

DOCTOR: I stand upon a black void. The stars are as spotlights shining into the night.

ATROPOS: Do you wish to see what is on the other side?

DOCTOR: In the geocentric universe the stars are the edge of the universe. By definition there can be nothing beyond. Though I know the Ptolemaic universe is impossible, I cannot deny the evidence of my senses.

CLOTHO: Let us step beyond. Close your eyes, Doctor.

DOCTOR: I feel a breeze, Fates.

LACHESIS: Open your eyes. Look beneath your feet. What do you see?

DOCTOR: I see a surface, formless and grey. But where does the light originate? If we are beyond the universe how can we see?

ATROPOS: Look up, Doctor. Perhaps that will answer your questions.

DOCTOR: And be driven mad by the beings that live beyond the fabric of space and time?

CLOTHO: Do you not trust to your innate curiosity? You must know, Doctor. That is who you are. When you were born I determined your fate, and that fate was to be curious in all things.

LACHESIS: Do you not trust yourself? Others have always trusted in you, and when I measured out the threads of your life I saw that your lives would end because of the trust others placed in you.

ATROPOS: Do you not trust to fate? You have seen a future, true, but have you not walked in eternity? You have seen things that may happen in time, but they do not happen today. You have many days still ahead of you.

DOCTOR: Very well. I shall look into the void beyond the universe. How can this be? Nothing I see is possible!

CLOTHO: What do you see, Doctor?

DOCTOR: I see galaxies and their great spiraled arms. I see comets streaking through the skies. Light comes from everywhere for stars are all about, too numerous to count. I do not understand. Where are we? What are those bubbles I see in the distance?

LACHESIS: They too are worlds, Doctor, taken out of space and shelled within spheres just as Earth is.

DOCTOR: How dare you steal worlds!

CLOTHO: We have not stolen them. We have saved them. You have met many gods in your travels. You met Zeus and the Olympians, Sutekh and the Osirans. The gods warred, Doctor. Worlds were ravaged. Civilisations fell.

LACHESIS: Worlds threatened were pulled out of space, protected in the spheres from the depredations of the warring gods. The spheres are impenetrable from the outside. Warships could not force the barriers and reach the civilisations within.

ATROPOS: Your vessel penetrated the barrier of this world. We had not anticipated this. If your vessel could enter one of the protected worlds then other vessels might as well. We could not permit you to remain.

DOCTOR: What if I wish to remain?

CLOTHO: You cannot.

LACHESIS: Your presence would draw combatants from Beta Osiris or another god-power.

ATROPOS: Nor can you escape your destiny. Is this not your vessel? Do you not call it a TARDIS?

DOCTOR: How did it come to be here? I wished never to journey in it again.

LACHESIS: We have brought it here.

ATROPOS: Will you not return to your travels? The universe has need of your skills, even if you think otherwise.

DOCTOR: When will Earth return to its proper place in space?

LACHESIS: The war is nearly over. Within a millennium these worlds will be returned to their proper places.

DOCTOR: Then what are you? The Fates? Greek gods? Something

else entirely?

ATROPOS: We are what we appear to be.

CLOTHO: Will you take up your key?

LACHESIS: Will you resume your journeys?

DOCTOR: What choice have I?

ATROPOS: The future is not written, Time Lord. You have seen a glimpse of what might be, not a glimpse of what will be.

DOCTOR: I have seen much in my travels, but nothing as remarkable as this. I will cherish the things you have shown me. Because I knew the universe I could not believe. Because I could not believe I would have abandoned the principles of a lifetime out of fear.

LACHESIS: Do not fear the future. Do not fear the things you cannot see. Be bold, Doctor. The universe has need of beings such as you.

ATROPOS: Know this, Doctor. Your friend Plato will write in time that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. You have examined your life. You have not squandered the cords of your life needlessly. You have been a force for good, Doctor, and I feel remorse every time I must do what my sisters demand of me. I know a day shall come when I must cut your final cord, and I shall weep for a year. Never allow your life to become unexamined.

DOCTOR: I shall not, Fates, and I thank you. The universe is stranger than we can imagine, indeed, and forever will there be new vistas to explore!

Short Trips: Transmissions

I'm sure many of my fellow Short Trips editors will say in their introductions how hard it was to choose just one story for inclusion in this volume. For me, the choice was relatively easy. That's no slight towards the other writers. I love all the stories in the collection -I can even tolerate my own on a good day - and would be proud to have any one of them represent the collection. I wouldn't say that Lonely is somehow 'better' than the rest, but it is different from them. And that's one of the key things I set out to do with Transmissions, to have at least a few stories that played with the format and did something unusual for Doctor Who.

Lonely also embodies an important aspect from my original guidelines. I asked writers to choose a form of communication and come up with a story around it, not just featuring that medium but making it pivotal to the story - rather than just dropping in a reference to a radio or a newspaper in the hopes that would be enough to satisfy the theme. Take away the medium and there is no story.

Richard Wright, a successful horror writer who had yet to dip a toe into the literary world of Doctor Who, pitched me a story set in an Internet chat room. Intrigued, I asked for an outline and instead received the complete story! What I loved most about it, aside from how well it captured the theme of the collection and its unique format, was that it creeped me out. Richard (good name that!) has a way of getting under your skin with his writing and I'm a sucker for that. As a result, Lonely became one of the first stories I commissioned.

Editing Transmissions was a dream come true for me. I loved every minute ol it - except perhaps having to turn down some terrific stories that just didn't quite fit - and I am deeply grateful to Ian Farrington for taking a chance on me and to Xanna Chown for all her support. I can't tell you how it felt to hold thai book in my hands for the first time. I am forever indebted to the 16 brilliant writers who came along for the ride.

Richard Salter

Lonely
Richard Wright

An adventure of the Eighth Doctor

*** Topic ofareyoulonely

Welcome to the Are You Lonely chat room.

1 user online: IamI

*** Faceless43 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 2 users online.

<Faceless43> Hey.

<Faceless43> Hey there.

<Faceless43> How you doing?

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Shy, huh? That's cool. I'm just glad I'm not the first one in. The irony would kill me.

<Faceless43> You know?

<Faceless43> Being the only person in a chat room for the lonely? I'd throw my hands up, call the universe the winner.

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Got to tell you though, I'm kind of waiting for the tumbleweeds to roll on by. You get tumbleweeds in cyberspace?

<Faceless43> You going to say anything?

<IamI> hello

<Faceless43> Yeah, hello. Been there already. Keep up.

<IamI> r u lonely?

<Faceless43> Sure. That's why I'm here.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Can't begin to imagine why.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Pretty desperate case, aren't you? Where you from?

<IamI> i am here

<Faceless43> You know, maybe I preferred the stony silence.

*** Shirley1968 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 3 users online.

<Faceless43> Hey there, how you doing?

<Shirley1968> Hello. Okay WI join you?

<Faceless43> Makes me happier than you can imagine. Been here before?

<Shirley1968> It's not exactly the first place Google brings up.

<Faceless43> Tried a few others first, right?

<Shirley1968> I did. They're very busy. Everybody knows each other. It always feels like being new at a youth club, standing in the corner waiting for somebody to take pity on you. I'm too old for that sort of thing.

<Faceless43> You keep coming online though. You keep on looking.

<Shirley1968> Yes.

<Faceless43> What for?

<Shirley1968> I don't know. Just voices, I think. Company.

<Faceless43> Yeah. I get that.

<IamI> r u lonely?

<Faceless43> Say hello to the welcoming committee.

<Shirley1968> Welcoming committee?

<Faceless43> Never mind.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Shirley1968> Why? Do you mind if I ask?

<Faceless43> I could take a guess.

<IamI> i am lonely don't stop typing

<Shirley1968> That's mean.

<Faceless43> Okay, okay. What about you? Why are you lonely?

<Shirley1968> I live alone. It's sort of complicated.

<Faceless43> Hey, if you can't unburden yourself to two total strangers in an anonymous chatroom, where can you?

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Shirley1968> Thanks, but we've only just met.

<Faceless43> We've never met. Never going to. That's sort of the point, right?

<Shirley1968> I suppose.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Good advice.

<Shirley1968> I had a husband and a baby boy. I don't any more. They left. I'm alone.

<Shirley1968> I'm not explaining this very well.

<Faceless43> He took your kid?

<Shirley1968> He had to. I couldn't cope.

<Shirley1968> And the house is empty when I come home. It's maddening. I need voices.

<Faceless43> I got voices all around me. Work all day in a call centre, come home at night to roommates I got nothing in common with, go back to work the next day. I speak to hundreds of people, but don't really talk to any of them. Make any sense?

<Shirley1968> That's horrible.

<Faceless43> Says you. After yours, I feel dumb even mentioning it.

<Shirley1968> Don't.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> So you keep saying buddy.

<Shirley1968> Why are you so lonely?

<IamI> i am the only one i am smaller don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Witness the fine line between lonely and needy.

<IamI> don't stop typing

*** Nicky has entered channel #areyoulonely. 4 users online.

<Shirley1968> Hello Nicky.

<Faceless43> Hey Nick.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Nicky> Hi everyone.

<Faceless43> Welcome to the party. BYOEC.

<Nicky> I don't know that one.

<Faceless43> Bring Your Own Existential Crisis. Think it'll catch on?

<Shirley1968> Ignore him. He thinks he's funny.

<Nicky> No, it was good.

<Faceless43> You humour me. I like you.

<Shirley1968> So what about you Nicky? Why are you here?

<Faceless43> Jeez. Let the guy settle in first.

<Shirley1968> How do you know it's not a girl?

<Nicky> I just saw the link. Thought I'd give it a try.

<Faceless43> No need to be shy. Let me summarise where we're at.

<Faceless43> I feel lonely in a crowd.

<Faceless43> Shirley can't stand having nobody at home.

<Faceless43> We don't have the faintest idea what IamI's problem is, but he sure does have one.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> See? It's like an intuition with me. Scary. So what's your beef?

<Nicky> I have somebody at home.

<Shirley1968> Good. Everybody should have that.

<Nicky> Sometimes they scare me.

<Faceless43> Why?

<Nicky> Sometimes they hurt me.

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> Come again?

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> Like the guy says. Hurt you how?

<Nicky> It's for my own good.

<Nicky> I have to be punished.

<Shirley 1968> How old are you Nicky?

<Nicky> Twelve.

<Faceless43> jeez.

<Shirley1968> Who hurts you?

<Nicky> .

<Faceless43> Come on kid, who hurts you?

<Nicky> I'm not allowed to tell. I'll be in trouble.

<Shirley1968> Then tell us where you live. We can help.

<Nicky> My teachers told me not to give out my address online.

<Faceless43> Look, sure, they're right, okay? But this

<Faceless43> This isn't the same thing.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Other things going on right now buddy, okay?

DrLuvin has entered channel #areyoulonely. 5 users online.

<Faceless43> Perfect timing.

<Nicky> Hi.

<DrLuvin> Can I come and play?

<Shirley1968> You picked a bad moment.

<Faceless43> Nicky, stick around, okay? Don't go nowhere.

<Nicky> Okay.

<DrLuvin> Don't mind me, you boys do your thing.

<DrLuvin> All the same to me. I'm open-minded.

<DrLuvin> So, what's happening with you, Shirl?

<Shirley1968> Not much.

<DrLuvin> Cool. Field's open.

<DrLuvin> Outstanding.

<DrLuvin> So.

<DrLuvin> What are you wearing?

<DrLuvin> .

<Shirley1968> I beg your pardon?

<DrLuvin> What are you wearing? Something cute? Something slinky? It's something slinky, yes? I love slinky.

<Faceless43> Wow.

<Faceless43> Buddy, do you ever have the wrong chat room.

<DrLuvin> What?

<Shirley1968> We're not here for

<Shirley1968> You know.

<Shirley1968> Whatever you had in mind.

<Faceless43> And did we mention that Nicky's twelve?

<DrLuvin> Twelve?

<DrLuvin> Oh god.

<DrLuvin> Oh god, I'm so sorry.

<DrLuvin> Really, I saw the name of the chatroom, and I

<DrLuvin> I'm so embarrassed.

<Shirley1968> Don't worry about it.

<DrLuvin> SO embarrassed.

<Faceless43> Don't sweat it buddy. You made my night.

<Nicky> Me too. You're funny.

<Shirley1968> I wish I'd dressed for the occasion.

<Faceless43> LOL. Listen, don't get me wrong, but we were kind of in the middle of something.

<DrLuvin> Hey, no problem. Not a problem at all. My humiliation and I will take our leave.

<Nicky> I should go too.

<Shirley1968> WAIT

<Shirley1968> Nicky, wait. We need to talk.

<DrLuvin> How do you log out of this thing then?

<Faceless43> Just click the log out doohickey.

<DrLuvin> It's not working.

<DrLuvin> Nothing is.

<Faceless43> So close the window already. Little x in the top right of the screen. Can't miss it.

<Faceless43> You still here?

<DrLuvin> I can't find it. Look, I know this sounds strange, but I can't see it.

<Nicky> I can't log out either. Everything's gone.

<DrLuvin> I can't see the window.

<Faceless43> Gone? What are you talking about?

<Nicky> I don't know where I am.

<DrLuvin> I can't see the window, and I can't see the button to log out, and I can't see my hands.

<Faceless43> ?

<Shirley1968> I can't either. Can you see your hands? Or the screen?

<Faceless43> Course I can see them. How else

<Faceless43> how

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> .

<Faceless43> No.

<Faceless43> I don't see anything at all.

<Faceless43> What's happening?

<Nicky> My hands are gone, and so are my eyes, and so is my body.

<Faceless43> Kid, you're freaking me out.

<Shirley 1968> Look for yourself. I don't know where I am! There's nothing but

<Shirley 1968> Nothing but your words. You're just

<Nicky> I've got to get back! They'll hurt me!

<Faceless43> Wait up. Everybody just take a second here.

<Shirley1968> It's as though I've been cut out of my body. I'm here, and there are words that are you, and I don't know how to get back. I've got no hands, and no mouse, and there's no screen with a window to close, there's just this space, and I think I'm crying somewhere.

<Faceless43> Everybody relax, okay? Okay? We can figure this out. You're crying somewhere, see?

<DrLuvin> I don't want to play these games! It's not what I'm into! Just give me back my body, and I won't go to the police, okay? I won't tell the police.

<DrLuvin> Okay?

<DrLuvin> I PROMISE I WON'T TELL THE POLICE

<Faceless43> LISTEN, if Shirley's crying somewhere, then it's got to be her body doing it! She's still there somewhere. So are my hands. Somewhere, my hands are still on my arms.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Faceless43> My

<Faceless43> Wait up. Iaml. Can you see your hands?

<IamI> i am lonely

<Faceless43> Your hands. Can you see your goddam hands!

<IamI> i am i

<Shirley1968> Are you doing this?

<Faceless43> ARE YOU DOING THIS

<IamI> u r here

<Shirley1968> Tell us what's happening!

<IamI> u r here don't stop typing

<DrLuvin> What does that mean! What happens if we stop! Who ARE you?

Jsmith8 has entered channel #areyoulonely. 6 users online.

<Jsmith8> Finally! There you are! Why on earth did you wander off like that? Do you have any idea how many of these chat things I've been through looking for you? Well? Do you?

<Shirley1968> Out! Get out!

<Nicky> Out mr, you've got to go!

<Faceless43> Buddy, there's no time to explain, just log out, right now!

<DrLuvin> TAKE ME WITH YOU WHERE ARE MY HANDS

<Jsmith8> Where you left them I imagine. What a peculiar question. Don't stop typing, by the way.

<Shirley1968> What? Why do you people keep saying that?

<Jsmith8> Oh, it's such a chore to explain. There are, you know, algorithms and the like. You've been in a chat room before?

<Shirley 1968> Of course...

<Jsmith8> Well, come on then! What happens when you sit too long without typing?

<Nicky> The system sees you're inactive, boots you out of the chat.

<Jsmith8> Excellent Nicky! I'm glad to see somebody brought a functioning bag of faculties with them.

<Faceless43> But that's what we want. We stop typing, and we get the hell out of here!

<Jsmith8> Sorry, no, you're exactly one hundred per cent, wrong. You think that's what you want, but it really, really isn't.

<Jsmith8> Ah. I've just lost my hands.

<Jsmith8> That's rather unpleasant, isn't it? The dislocation. Knowing they should be there, might still be there somewhere, but having no connection to them at all.

<Shirley1968> Please. I can't take this.

<Jsmith8> Sorry. You've been coaxed out of your body - don't ask me how, we don't have the time. If you could log off normally, and you can't, you would follow the path back to your flesh, where you would be gently deposited, right as a trivet. You would be in control. Being kicked out is

<Jsmith8> Violent. Directionless. The chances of hitting your own body are astronomically small.

<Jsmith8> And if you miss

<Jsmith8> Well wherever you lay your hat, and all that

<Jsmith8> Just don't stop typing.

<Shirley1968> .

<DrLuvin>

<Nicky> .

<Faceless43> Are you doing this?

<Jsmith8> Me? Hardly. Nice internet you have here, by the way. Web 2.0, is it? Or are you on to 3? It all goes downhill after that, I'm afraid.

<Nicky> Downhill?

<Jsmith8> Web 3.6. Barry, it likes to call itself. Huge inferiority complex, deeply attention seeking, sociopathic in ways that only an artificial intelligence can achieve. Causes all sorts of problems. You'll get through it.

<Jsmith8> Well, your species will, at any rate.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Hush. Not now. I'm mid-adumbration.

<Faceless43> He's doing it. Whatever's happening, he's doing it. He stole my hands and eyes.

<Jsmith8> Oh ho, yes, there go the eyes, right on cue. There's no screen any more of course, and without my hands and the mouse... yes, I'm completely trapped here with you, hanging in cyberspace like a sad digital wraith. The claustrophobia's no fun at all, is it? There's nothing, everywhere, crushing through you even though there is no you for it to crush.

<Nicky> Are you here to help?

<Jsmith8> Of course I am! That's what I do. Over and over again. This is bit of a change, though.

<Jsmith8> Usually, there are corridors. And running. If you feel yourself edging towards despair, just thank your lucky stars that you're not running along corridors.

<Nicky> I don't have much time! How are we going to get out of here?

<DrLuvin> HELP US GET US OUT OF HERE FOR PITY'S SAKE HELP US

<Jsmith8> Ah.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Oh dear.

<IamI> don't stop typing

<Jsmith8> There seems to have been a small misunderstanding. I'm not here to help you.

<Jsmith8> I'm here to help Iaml.

<Shirley1968> .

<Jsmith8> Perhaps I should leave, come back in, start over.

<Jsmith8> Oh, that's right, no way to log out. Well, this is awkward.

<Faceless43> Him? You're here to help HIM? What about US?

<Jsmith8> In the long run, I'm helping you too. Sort of

<Nicky> What is he? IamI?

<IamI> i am i

<IamI> lonely

<Jsmith8> Both true. It's lost, and alone, and very much smaller than it's used to being.

<Faceless43> It? It's an it? I'm in here with an it?

<Jsmith8> An artificial intelligence. It used to run a starship.

<DrLuvin> I'M STUCK IN A CHATROOM WITH AN ALIEN AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE MY HANDS ARE

<Nicky> Why is it here?

<Jsmith8> Now THAT'S a good question. Well done Nicky, you're asking all the right things.

<Jsmith8> It used to tend to the needs and wants of the creatures who built the ship, a vast, biotechnological intelligence. An automated supernanny, if you like.

<Jsmith8> Its masters wanted you. They came here, not so long ago, to your world, in their clever, loyal ship.

<Jsmith8> There was a

<Jsmith8> An incident.

<Jsmith8> They died, vaporised instantly for the most part. Some were a little more belligerent, but it's all taken care of now Nothing for you to worry about.

<Nicky> You killed them.

<Jsmith8> An unsavoury side effect of stopping them from devouring your species, actually. When I destroyed the ship, IamI fled to the largest local repository it could find. Your internet.

<Jsmith8> You wouldn't know now, but IamI used to be rather good company. It's lobotomised itself to squeeze into this cyberspace, and now it's trying to fulfil its programming.

<Shirley1968> That's all it wants? People to look after?

<Jsmith8> Yes. It's my fault. I have to fix it.

<DrLuvin> So set it free, let it go, let us go, PLEASE PLEASE LET US GO LET US

<Jsmith8> Even if I could, where would it go? My TARDIS could hold it, but there are already more intelligences in there than I'm comfortable with.

<DrLuvin> What are you talking about! Tell me where my HANDS ARE!!!

<Jsmith8> Oh, shush. There's only one solution. You stay here and keep it company.

<Faceless43> Are you nuts? We can't stay here!

<Jsmith8> Why not? You already live on the edges of your own lives, hiding away, wandering a pretend world without touching anybody. Even with your whole species connected by wires, able to reach each other across an entire world at the click of a mouse, you still choose to make loneliness an art form! IamI hasn't trapped you. You trapped yourselves.

<Faceless43> You son ofa

<Jsmith8> It's an elegant solution, in say so myself. IamI gets the company it needs, and stays safely tucked into this corner of the web. At the same time, none of you will have to fear the silence in your heads again. Ever.

<Jsmith8> That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

<DrLuvin> I DON'T WANT TO STAY I WANT TO SEE MY HANDS DON'T GIVE US TO PT

<Jsmith8> Too late. What do you say, IamI? Do you agree?

<IamI> not enough they r not enough

<Jsmith8> How many did I take away from you? A hundred? A thousand?

<IamI> i want more

<Jsmith8> Of course you do. Would you like me to get them for you?

<Shirley1968> What are you doing?

<Jsmith8> Making amends. I can bring a thousand more, just like you. The lost and lonely. The disaffected. The sad and sadder.

<IamI> yes

<Nicky> NO! You can't!

<Jsmith8> You should see my address book. I think I can find enough who fit the profile, who need the help. But IamI, you have to set me free, do you understand? You have to let me go.

<IamI> why

<Jsmith8> Oh, tyrants to quash, wrongs to right, souls to save. I'm all booked up, basically.

<Nicky> Please

<Jsmith8> See the bigger picture, Nicky. You'll be guardians, keeping it sated, saving the world. Can you imagine what IamI could wreak, in its loneliness? The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

<Jsmith8> I met him once. Splendid chap.

<Faceless43> Spock?

<Jsmith8> Nimoy.

<DrLuvin> I'M BEGGING YOU PLEASE DON'T GO

<Jsmith8> IamI, I'm ready. I need the administrator permissions for this chatroom, so I can send the invites by email. This place will fill up tout de suite.

<IamI> i will not be lonely

<Jsmith8> Give it a few years, and you'll be releasing people just to hear yourself think.

<Faceless43> Come on buddy, we can about talk this.

<Shirley1968> You have to give us a chance!

<Jsmith8> Life did that already, over and again, but you ran away.

<Nicky> Will we be safe? Will it hurt me?

<Jsmith8> Yes, and no.

<Nicky> That's okay then.

<Shirley1968> Nicky!

<Nicky> I want to stay with you. Please?

<Faceless43> Kid

<Jsmith8> Too late. IamI?

<IamI> adding ur profile

<Jsmith8> Jolly good.

<IamI> profile added

<Jsmith8> You're kidding me. Really?

<Jsmith8> So it is. Excellent!

<Jsmith8> Time to get to work then.

<IamI> i will not be lon >)@&

<IamI> &&#@///

<IamI> (*£(>?@}]]]a!*

<Jsmith8> Oops, sorry about that. With you in a minute.

<IamI> &A7ffi##A($”YA

<IamI> ?%anged

<IamI> changed

<DrLuvin> WHAT CHANGED WHAT DID YOU WHAT’S CHANGED!!!!

<Jsmith8> Incredible place this, don’t you think? A world within a world, a reality where nothing exists but lines of code, manipulating the fabric of the place in infinite ways. Words are power here. You just need the right ones. A death ago, I used to fantasise about changing reality with a well-turned phrase.

<IamI> i am lonely

<Jsmith8> Yes.

<IamI> don’t let them go

<Jsmith8> Sorry. You have no right to them. They are not yours to tend.

<Faceless43> What? You’re letting us go? What?

<Jsmith8> Of course I am, I just needed those admin powers. What? You didn’t

<Jsmith8> Good heavens, I can’t blame IamI for falling for it - it only has half a mind to work with! The rest of you though... I mean, how transparent was that? It wasn’t even a double bluff, just a single one! Nicky’s twelve, and he knew I was bluffing.

<Nicky> I didn’t.

<Jsmith8> But you said

<Jsmith8> Oh.

<Jsmith8> That bad, is it?

<Nicky> I just wanted to be free.

<Jsmith8> Nicky, Nicky, there's no freedom in hiding away.

<IamI> u cannot free them

<Jsmith8> You can't stop me. Your little linguistic glitch back there was me taking your admin powers off you. You're trapped, just like everybody else.

<Jsmith8> I have the power now.

<DrLuvin> PLEASE I can't take any more of this I promise I PROMISE I'LL BE GOOD

<Jsmith8> I hope so. You might want to reconsider your approach to dating, by the way.

<DrLuvin> YES anything anything just let me GO

<Jsmith8> Gladly. DrLuvin has left the chat

*** DrLuvin has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 5 users online.

<JSmith8> Back to the flesh you go.

<IamI> stop

<Faceless43> Wait! Is he in his body?

<Jsmith8> Of course he is. He's perfectly well, and no doubt enjoying the full use of his hands. Nicky?

<Nicky> What?

<Jsmith8> When you get back, stay in your room. There will be a knock at the door shortly. Nobody will hurt you tonight.

<Nicky> I'll be in trouble!

<Jsmith8> No, you won't Trouble's coming, but not for you. Nicky has left the chat.

*** Nicky has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 4 users online.
<IamI> stop this

<Shirley1968> Is Nicky really going to be all right?

<IamI> stop

<Jsmith8> I don't know. He'll be free of that place, and those people. That's all I can do. Which brings us to you two.

<Faceless43> I'm ready

<Shirley1968> Yes, please.

<Jsmith8> Just try and remember, the best words, the useful ones, don't get punched into keyboards. When you get back, find each other.

<Faceless43> How?

<Jsmith8> No idea. Could be tricky. I'm sure Nicky would be pleased to meet you too though, don't you think?

<Faceless43> What?

<Jsmith8> You're very welcome. Faceless 43 has left the chat. Shirley1968 has left the chat.

*** Faceless43 has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 3 users online.

***Shirley1968 has logged out of channel #areyoulonely. 2 users

online

<IamI> i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am lonely i am

<IamI> r u lonely

<Jsmith8> No.

<IamI> r u lonely

<Jsmith8> Stop that now.

<IamI> u r lonely

<Jsmith8> I rarely travel alone. I surround myself with voices. How could I possibly be lonely?

<IamI> u r

<IamI> u r lonely.

<IamI> ur heart hurtz

<Jsmith8> Hearts.

<Jsmith8> Yes.

<Jsmith8> Sometimes. I travel vast spans, see things wondrous and foul, and there's always somebody by my side. But sometimes I'm lonely.

<IamI> y

<Jsmith8> I'm not one of them.

<Jsmith8> I'm only pretending.

<Jsmith8> I'm

<Jsmith8> Actually, I'm trading angst with a creature I'm going to erase in a minute. Tasteless, wouldn't you say? That's the thing about leaving the flesh behind. You become somebody different in this place.

<IamI> where is my flesh

<Jsmith8> Gone. Sorry.

<IamI> i am scared

<Jsmith8> Not for long. You have no body to return to, and it's time to put this place out of business. Look on the bright side. You won't be lonely any more.

<IamI> please

<Jsmith8> IamI has left the chat.

***IamI has logged out of channel #areyoulonely 1 user online.

<Jsmith8> .

<Jsmith8> .

<Jsmith8> has logged out of channel #areyoulonely.

*** Error 5698. You do not have permission to access this feature. Please contact the administrator. Channel number not recognised ***

Short Trips: How The Doctor Changed My Life

How The Doctor Changed My Life was a collection of 25 short stories by first-time authors, the result of a Big Finish competition.

The response to the competition took us completely by surprise. First there was just the sheer volume of entries. We asked people to submit complete stories - and only gave six weeks to write them. We thought we might get as many as 100 entries; we got more than 1,000. The more than 2,500,000 words (roughly the word count of all 28 volumes of Big Finish's Short Trips) took four months just to read.

Then there was the quality of the entries. The vast majority of the entries were good - engaging, competently told, well thought-through. We'd originally planned to publish just one winner. But my shortlist of 25 were all better than good, a strong (if raw) collection that deserved a book of their own.

In the bit-more-than-a-year between the winners being announced and the book being published, I worked with the authors to hone and improve their stories. They couldn't have been a more conscientious, keen or hard-working bunch. Many of them have since been published in other things and we're all still in touch, comparing rejection letters and war stories as we persevere as Writers.

I'm really proud of the finished book and found picking just one story really difficult. Perhaps it should have been the overall winner, but Michael Coen's Homework has already been published in two Short Trips volumes.

I've chosen Anna's story partly because I'm envious of how well she captures the tricky Second Doctor. And then there's the vivid language, the fact it's funny and moving all at once... That's all Anna - I think my biggest contribution to the final version of the story was objecting to the original title (Genius Loci is the name of

one of Big Finish's other books).

So really I've chosen this one over the other, equally worthy stories, because it needed the least interference from me.

Simon Guerrier

Lares Domestici
Anna Bratton

An adventure of the Second Doctor

The little man had strong opinions on the existence of alien life forms, as well as the importance of cake. His visits were usually heralded by the appearance of one and the rapid depletion of stores of the other.

After the ninth or tenth visit, Vivian stopped locking the doors. The monsters and the Doctor got in anyway, and fumbling with *the* chain had nearly cost her dear. One of the creatures had spun itself out of *the* shadows of the hallway and wriggled at her, mottled brown skin glistening eerily in the early light.

'It's not their fault, really,' the Doctor insisted later, mouth full of chocolate torte. 'I really think they're just a bit single-minded. It's a defence mechanism, I'm afraid. When their heads are clearer, I expect they'll be better behaved.'

Just then, something had rattled ominously in the pipes and he'd dropped his fork, whipped some sort of metal cylinder from his coat and disappeared under the sink, tapping and muttering 'Oh, dear, oh dear,' to himself. She found herself wishing that this still alarmed her.

Vivian wasn't supposed to be here, but neither were they. As for the Doctor, that was anyone's guess.

'I'm trying to write a book, you know -' she told him, more wearily than cross.

The little man waved a hand irritably from somewhere under the sink. 'Well don't let me get in your way.'

Vivian had first seen them three days after *the* funeral. A bookcase had been promised to someone or other and she'd pulled it away

from the wall, only to discover a writhing mass of what seemed to be giant flatworms. Hissing like silk ribbons, they'd wriggled through the air and into the heating grate. She'd followed the rustling through *the* vents, ended up in the cellar with hundreds of beady eyes and rustling forms rippling agitatedly at her, and had gone quietly back upstairs and bolted the door.

This explained the whispering, she remembered thinking.

The man from Pest Control had listened to her description and then asked a series of impertinent questions about her medications interacting. A day later there was a sound like the universe tearing itself apart, and looking out the study windows she noticed a boxy blue shape lurking next to *the* shed. Going downstairs she found him: black jacket, checkered trousers, hangdog expression counter-intuitively bright as he served up the bundt cake left over from the reception. Two plates were on the table.

'They've sent me to take care of your, ah, extra occupants,' he'd said, and smiled. Trusting that smile had probably been a mistake. 'I was trying to find a home for them, you see, but they'd fallen into the vortex slipstream. I seem to have shown up a few days late. Still!' He clasped his hands, beaming. They seem to have done very nicely for themsel-'

'Wait, so it's your fault they're here?' she snapped.

'Ah,' he hemmed. 'Well, yes, I suppose you might say that...' There was something about his crestfallen expression that wouldn't allow Vivian to stay angry with him.

'What are they, anyway?' she asked, more kindly. 'Some sort of mutation?'

'Oh, heavens no; just aliens. But I'll deal with them, don't you worry.' Fourteen discarded drafts, nine crying jags, six sightings and three terse emails from her editor later, Vivian was trying to remember why she'd bothered to come back at all. She'd told herself the writing would go faster once she'd cleared things out a bit, but between the ribbon creatures - or 'Larians', whatever the

hell that meant - and the interloper with his weird little whirring device, nothing much was getting done.

‘Sorry, who’s sent you, again?’

‘Oh,’ he’d say, and somehow never get around to telling her. He had a knack for circuitousness that her grandfather would have loved.

‘So when’s it gonna be fixed?’

He blinked like a small, affronted owl. ‘”Fixed”?’

‘Fixed. No more voices. No more... whatever those things are. I just want this house back.’

‘Hmm,’ was all he would say.

Plot Points 4 and 7 ended up contradicting each other despite Vivian’s best efforts to untangle them, and she was starting to hate her protagonist The Doctor had gone through most of the sponge cake and they were running low on tea. The monsters - or whatever - stopped whispering every time she’d started talking aloud in order to find the cadences of her characters’ speech. That really bothered her, but the silence in the rooms was worse than the susurration in the vents or the occasional fits of recorder music echoing from the pantry.

Time had warped the glass of the study windows into falling waves. Glass was a liquid, her grandfather had explained, just thick and gloopy like syrup. It might take hundreds ofyears to see any difference, but everyone’s windows were melting. Vivian remembered how her father would sit at this desk for hours, tracing the bulges with an idle finger and staring at the overgrown tangle of lilacs and strangler vines clustering outside.

She looked up suddenly. That blue box was back in the yard, again. Something shivered on the surface of the glass and she whipped around to see one of the... things floating behind her, its expression as flat as the rest of its noodly body as it undulated in eerie silence. She yanked her laptop’s extension cord from the wall and swung it

in the creature's direction.

Without showing any obvious fear or disquiet, it shivered away from her.

A moment or two later the Doctor was in the room, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. 'Getting on better with them, are we?'

'I want them out,' Vivian seethed. 'Now.'

'Working on it, working on it,' he soothed. 'Time for a break?'

Vivian glowered at him as he fumbled with the good china. 'I don't want you here either, you know. This is my house, not an intergalactic bus station.'

He made a vague head motion; passed her a cup. 'You grew up here.' It wasn't a question.

'This house has always been in *the* family.'

'And now?'

'No family any more.'

'Oh.' He put his fork down sadly. 'Orphaned, so to speak... '

Vivian snorted, leaning back against the sink. 'It wasn't some big explosion or anything dramatic; I was just the youngest, by some way. The new kid in a gaggle of older brothers and sisters, most of them dead by the time I'd grown up.' She traced the rim of her mug with a finger, wondering idly why she was telling him this. 'Old things everywhere. Even now.'

The Doctor's beetle brows furrowed as though in offence. 'Hmmph. Well, one gets used to it Your house-guests are also fond of older structures, so it might take some time before I've, er, coaxed them out I'm sure you'll adjust' He took a swig of his tea and beamed.

Things had started turning up. Old keys, pennies, a barrette she'd

lost down the vents when she was five, a cufflink of her father's. Some sort of tribute, maybe. Vivian rarely saw *the* creatures at the moment, and they wiggled rapidly out of sight when she did.

She'd begun leaving cake on *the* table out of habit As quietly as he came in, as whispery as the ribbon creatures were, at least they were genuine sounds. It was better than straining her ears for the cadences and treads of people that weren't there any more, aware of scents and sights whose originators were long since gone. Bad company was still company at least

Even so, it all kept her from writing. And then she'd found her grandfather's old stamp album mixed in with her mother's things, and that day had been just lost Worse, a small, raggedy character with a bowl haircut had cropped up in the fifteenth draft, which seemed to be holding despite the plot having stalled because she didn't dare think out loud any more. It was almost easier to strain her ears for the hissing in the vents.

One late morning she awoke to a very loud sort of silence. She lay there, listening to the no-sound, shambling downstairs only after it became unbearable. The Doctor was asleep in her grandfather's overstuffed armchair, head slumped forward, hands crossed, tea going cold at his side. The creatures pulsed in the sunlit air: rustling shoals of parlour fish, dusty hides faintly iridescent now by light of day. They quietly turned as one to regard her.

She regarded them back.

She should have been angry, terrified, something. But all she could think was that she should put the kettle on, so she did.

They're refugees. The last of their kind, as far as they know.' 'How do you know that?'

'They told me.' His shoes - currently the only visible part of him - shifted uneasily as the compartment slipped a little. 'Oh, dear. You should really clean this out -'

'They talk?'

‘Oh yes. They’ve even been known to sing.’

‘So why don’t they talk to me?’

She could tell by the way his feet twitched closer together that the rest of him had shrugged. ‘Apart from being a bit disorientated from their stint in the vortex? Shyness, I expect.’ The Doctor’s voice echoed from inside the dumb waiter, pieces of fairy cake by his heels. ‘Hmm. They’re refusing to unspool; I think they’ve even sunk their moor-roots into *the* insulation. Incidentally - and it’s not my place to speculate - what did you say to make them so worried?’

‘I didn’t say -’ Vivian began. ‘What do you mean, worried?’

‘Larians live in colonies, so naturally they’re a bit concerned that you’re just puttering around on your own.’

Vivian’s jaw clenched. ‘I’m fine.’

‘I didn’t mean to suggest that you weren’t. Sometimes you’re just alone.’

The compartment rattled slightly. ‘Lots ofreasonably capable sorts can handle being by themselves.’

‘Like you?’

There was a momentary stillness from inside the shaft. ‘It’s a very hard thing to go through life alone,’ he said at length. ‘Remembering, but knowing that you aren’t remembered.’

She wasn’t sure where that had come from. ‘But you just said it was all right to be alone.’

‘Yes, I suppose I did.’ The Doctor’s feet shifted. ‘Nothing wrong with it, but not easy.’

Vivian couldn’t shake *the* feeling that, she was skirting the edges of something deeper and darker than the problem at hand. ‘Well, fine,

but I don't really want a house that sounds like it's full of ghosts -'

'Oh, all homes are full of ghosts, really. At least this one is properly alive.' There was that whirring sound and flakes of plaster drifted down his frock coat and checked trousers. 'What's so bad about a house that listens to you, anyway?'

After the fifteenth draft joined all the others on the scrap-heap, after the Doctor had been and gone yet again, Vivian sat for a long hour on the staircase, watching the streetlights filtering in dimly through the stained- glass window of the landing, highlighting the forms of orioles and roses.

Vaguely, she remembered giving them names when she was younger. (The stub of the silver pencil she'd worn down writing her first stories had resurfaced like an old memory, sitting on the desk. A faint trail of dust led to the floor vent.)

There was an expectant silence in the dark of the house.

She started telling it about being five and *the* way the lights reflected against *the* bay windows when the tree was all set up and lit; about sneaking down every morning in December just in case Santa had come early. About Grandpa Hugh's boating stories and how every Sunday they had had stew.

(Later in *the* night, the whispers told her about bright violet skies and the laughter of someone whose name was unpronounceable, and of a little man in a blue box and of war.)

She told it how *the* mapping of wrinkles moved across her mother's hands kneading dough, and the way her father's study always smelled like linen and juniper, and of the geraniums that languished indoors through the long winter.

(The whispers told her of gardens burned to cinders, and of songs they were terrified of forgetting, and of the lost.)

The silence that returned was a little too full, so Vivian set to work on Draft 16.

‘You could just leave them here,’ she’d blurted after finding him under the sink, tapping *the* pipes.

‘I am leaving them here. Just making an adjustment or two -’ The Doctor beamed. ‘There! I’ve jinxed the signal; wouldn’t want anyone coming to bother them. Or you, for that matter.’

‘So that’s it?’ she’d said, and then, after his previous statement had sunk in. ‘What do you mean, “leaving them here”?’

‘Well, do you want me to take them away?’

‘No!’

‘Lovely. They want to stay.’ He beamed again. ‘I wouldn’t use the disposal too much. Machine noise bothers them. And don’t block the vents, and make sure you show them how to work the thermostat before winter.’

Vivian watched him tuck his handkerchief into his breast pocket and felt an odd twinge of loss. ‘What about you?’

‘Oh, I know how to work the thermostat -’

‘No, I meant where are you going?’

The rest of her writing career would be spent trying to describe that sad, sweet little smile. ‘Home and away, my dear; home and away.’

Draft 16 held nicely, though the whispers occasionally took issue with her pacing and the implementation of plot points. Now and then something would move on the periphery of sight and there would be a hairpin or a paperclip or one of her grandmother’s antique buttons waiting for her. Sometimes there was singing.

She never saw the Doctor again, but she always kept something around the kitchen. Just in case.

Short Trips: Christmas
Around the World

When I was researching my story for The Ghosts of Christmas, I chanced upon a website devoted to Christmas traditions in other countries. It opened up a whole world beyond the usual tinsel, turkey and crackers, with such joys as 'A smorgasbord is served on Christmas Eve with a customary rice pudding for dessert' and 'After the meal the Tomte comes, a Christmas elf that lives in the floorboards.' When I started commissioning Christmas Around the World, I hoped some of these legends would come to life in the stories, or inspire the writers to make up new ones of their own.

I wasn't disappointed - Jolnir the wicked advertising elf, three (murderous lizard) kings, and a crazed politician called Nicholas Santana appeared, alongside the traditional Saint Nick from The Night Before Christmas', a sinister Christmas Corporation and many others.

I wanted to use the usual mix of established writers and new names in the anthology. Of the latter, Andrew Pidoux instantly came to mind as someone I wanted to see writing a Doctor Who story. He writes wonderful poetry: funny, clever, moving and a little bit weird. He agreed to pitch, and I looked forward to reading his prose.

He didn't send a pitch. He sent the whole story. It started: This is a story of the 120th Doctor Who. The Doctor, who is tall and bald and marvellous, is living in a state of utter squalor in a tall, marvellous flat at the top of the city of Skyfilth...' It was funny, clever, moving, a little bit weird... and wholly inappropriate. So he sent me a second story.

I love Lost and Founded. I love the contrast of the castaway creating his own little Christmas while the Doctor desperately hares around looking for an adventure. I love Jo reading Mills and Boon. I love the description of eating an octopus. Plus, I love the fact that it's a properly short short story.

And of course, alongside Christmas, reading short stories is one of my favourite things in the whole world.

Xanna Eve Chown

Lost and Founded
Andrew Pidoux

An adventure of the Third Doctor, with Jo

'Every day another thingy!' said the tall man who was watching the TARDIS began to take form. 'What strange thingies on this pieland. What strange mysteriousnesses. Yesterday, was it only yesterday? I did see a whole big bunch of munsters creeping down the sure towards little me. What strangenesses they was. All these strange day-to-days. Then there was those pesky aliens. What strange peskies they was. I don't believe in them at all. They is manifestations of the heat.'

The tall man scrambled in a ragged gait down the rocks and secreted himself behind a slim palm tree. He was very tall and slim with a shaggy mass of hair, so he believed that the palm tree completely hid him.

'It looks to my eyeballs like an old telephoney boss. I likes the looks of it, because I daresay it remind me of my wifey. When she used to go out after an argymit with me, and she used to ask the peaceman to borrow his boxes. But I mustn't start believing in it. Remember, John, what happened when you started to believe in that alien. You got all upset over nothings. That's when you hit yourself on the head butt. It was fat and green and it was only another mirage. It disappeared after a while in a wisp of haze. Then what good was your weapons?'

The tall man continued to watch, shielding his eyes from the sun, as a middle-aged grey-haired man emerged from the police box. He was dressed in old-fashioned garb, with a cape that flowed from his ample shoulders. The tall man chuckled to himself. 'What funnies

there is today. Look at this fellow. What's that he's weaving on his soldiers? I daresay it remind me of the pust but only slightly. I used to see such peoples in the pust, but they was rich and not like honest working mens. But they was all right.' The sight of the visitor had stirred something in the tall man's memory and a tear formed in his eye, then quickly broke and fell down through the dirt on his face. 'Don't start being sillies,' he said, turning away. 'It's just an old mirage, isn't it? Every times they fools you. And today of all days... '

After a few minutes, Jo emerged from the TARDIS wearing her smallest bikini, dappled with polka dots.

'Ah... ' said the Doctor, not quite sure where to look. 'You know, my dear, you ought to avail yourself of sun-cream. This is 1952 and you humans have been busy ruining the atmosphere for the past hundred years. You could find yourself with more than an attractive tan.'

'Don't worry, Doctor,' said Jo scathingly, as though addressing an overweening father. She unrolled the pink beach towel she'd been carrying and out fell a tube of factor 15, as well as a copy of a paperback called *Love on the Line.* The cover showed a woman tied to a train track, a puffy locomotive steaming towards her and a tall handsome fellow half- embracing and half-rescuing her, as though he weren't sure which was the most pressing task.

'Hmm...' said the Doctor, and turned again to face the sea with the air of one who did not approve. Jo scampered off towards the centre of the beach. The Doctor watched her spread the towel on the undulating sand, plonk herself down, and then open her book at some pre-marked place. With a sigh, the Doctor looked down at his feet. If there was anything he hated in this world more than interplanetary bureaucracy, it was sand. 'One can't walk on the stuff,' he said to himself. 'It gets into one's shoes, it gets into one's hair. There ought to be an interplanetary law against sand.'

Nonetheless he struggled over it grudgingly and made his way towards the black volcanic rocks that were tumbling haphazardly down at the back of the beach. Once he'd mounted them, the

Doctor felt himself on sturdier ground.

‘That’s more like it,’ he said under his breath. Quite soon, he attained a reasonable height and was able to look down and see the figure ofJo considerably reduced below him. They had materialised in a small bay. The sea was extremely blue and transparent There were eight or ten palm trees dotted nonchalantly around, and also a few boulders. He squinted out to sea, hoping the waves would reveal signs of hidden life. He did fancy he could see some dark shapes moving over the crystal blue waters far out. ‘Perhaps they’re jellied vampires’, he thought, looking suddenly interested. Then he realised that they were only the shadows of a couple of innocent clouds, fast evaporating in the sky.

The tall man hid himself perfectly behind a different palm tree and surveyed the beach. The mirage he had seen earlier was still there, much to his delight, but the strange fellow in the cloak no longer was. However, just beyond the mirage and lying on a large pink rectangle, there was an even more interesting sight ‘Good griefs, oh my godness,’ said the tall man excitedly. ‘Thank you lord for bringing me this mirage today. I forgive you all the munsters and cannonballs and whatnot This is really a lovely. It does look an awful lot like my wifely as I remembers her in my dreams. Only it doesn’t have the same colour hair. But it don’t matter, God! I don’t mind.’ The tall man narrowed his eyes. ‘What is it reading? It is reading a punk-coloured book, but I can’t see the tittle. It’s looks like the Meals and Boom books my wifey used to like. That’s what she would sometimes be gandering when we went up to bed, and that meant that she wouldn’t mind ifI turned off the light..’ He closed his eyes and a look of bliss came over his face.

When he reached the top of the rocks, the Doctor was greeted by the sight of yet more ocean. The island, it seemed, was remarkably small - perhaps not more than a square mile. He felt the pull-string on his cape digging into his neck a little in the heat, and one or two beads of sweat were journeying down the crag of his brow.

At the highest point of the island, the Doctor could see a small grassy hillock protruding from the volcanic rocks and, growing scrawnily out of it, a wizened black tree of a genus he didn’t

recognise. It seemed to have a sort of lateral foliage that dangled oddly from every branch.

Intrigued, the Doctor scrambled over, with half a mind that he might be able to discover a new species. Walking over to the tree, he bent down and looked at the foliage more closely, sniffing it with his detective's nose.

'How strange,' he said to himself. 'Not foliage, but seaweed. Perhaps some kind of freak tide deposited it here.' Casting his gaze upwards, the Doctor noticed that on the very top of the tree some sticks had become lodged in a loose star shape. 'Very odd,' he ruminated, 'that driftwood should have got caught way up there. And what are the odds that it would form a perfect pentagram?'

At the base of the tree the Doctor noticed some strange little package- like things that turned out, when he bent down to examine them, to be stones wrapped in palm leaves. 'This must surely be a sign of intelligent life. Perhaps, indeed, alien life,' he said triumphantly. 'There may be some mystery on these shores after all.'

The tall man was muttering to himself between mouthfuls ofoctopus and rainwater. 'So much for today,' he said. 'I don't like these days no more. All I gots is an old actipuss, and that don't taste very nicely. I remembers my wife Jane used to cook a lovely turk this time of year. Oh, she cooked that turk so special. The smell of it, I can all but smell it in me nostrel now. And I used to steal a lovely tree from John Handy's wood. I used to climb up a ladle and put the pretty star on the top. And then there was the fireboys who came singeing at our door, their breaths full of gists. They brung a right old ruckus they did.'

A spurt of ink suddenly jetted from one of the octopus's glands and splashed the tall man in the face. Giving up, he flung the thing aside and it slapped against a rock like a wet jumper with too many arms. 'Time to go an check on the latest miracle,' he said to himself, and tramped off in the direction of the beach again.

Exploring the area a little further, the Doctor came upon another

oddity. Someone - or something - had placed about fifty or sixty coconut halves in an arcane pattern on an outcrop of rock overlooking the sea.

‘What a conundrum,’ said the Doctor, his eyes gleaming. The coconuts had been arranged in such a fashion as to intimate a message of somesort, the Doctor felt - though he had no idea what it might be. He tried looking at them from every angle, checking to see if they lined up with the setting sun, as a stone circle might

‘Best go and get Jo,’ he decided after a while, scratching his head. ‘She may be in some kind of danger.’ Relishing the idea of interrupting Jo’s dull sun bath with news of a possible adventure, the Doctor scrambled off back down in the direction of the beach.

The tall man watched with squinting eyes as the Doctor slid in a hurried but dignified way down the black rocks. ‘It’s that fellow again, the one with a cape like a supperman. He do look a bit flustered, like he’s lost something voluble. I hope he finds it again, I really do.’

He let out a sudden laugh as the grey-haired man appeared to stop and look up in his direction, then continued gruffly on his way. ‘Blimey, that miracle’s got ears. I’ll have to make shire I don’t say much from now on. I don’t want any trouble from him. I’ll just watch him another few minutes and he’ll probably evaporate like that peacebox.’

‘Jo... Jo!’ the Doctor called in an excitable way across the beach.

Jo looked up from her book to see the Doctor waving an arm wildly and repeatedly stumbling over himself in the sand.

‘It seems,’ said the Doctor between awfully heavy breaths as he arrived at her towel, ‘we’re not alone here. Not at all.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Jo suspiciously.

‘Nothing to worry about I’m sure. But something or someone has been... *arranging* up there on the rocks.’

‘Arranging what?’

‘Coconuts, my dear. Coconuts!’ Jo looked at him with her eyebrows raised. ‘Well, don’t just stand there, Jo. Come and have a look.’

At the top of the island, the Doctor showed Jo what he had found.

‘Are you sure you haven’t done this?’ said Jo with a sideways glance.

‘I’ve done nothing of the sort,’ said the Doctor indignantly. ‘What a ridiculous suggestion.’ They looked again at the coconut patterns.

‘You know,’ said the Doctor. ‘That looks an awful lot like a Righteous Ghost.’

‘A what?’

‘Righteous Ghost. We used to hear tales of them on Gallifrey when I was growing up. Big, white creatures with wings and circular appendages hovering above their heads.’

‘Otherwise known as angels,’ said Jo.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose they were comparable to angels.’

‘You know, Doctor, you’re right. That’s what this is. It’s an angel. Look, it’s even got a halo.’

The Doctor took a few steps backwards, tilted his head and surveyed the coconuts proudly.

‘Yes, I am right, aren’t I?’

‘But that doesn’t tell us who put them there. Or why.’

‘Quite,’ said the Doctor. ‘Of course, whoever did this could be long dead.’ Even as he soberly said this, the Doctor could hardly contain his excitement at the fact that it might not be a coincidence, but

something more sinister.

‘Let’s split up,’ he said.

‘Good idea,’ said Jo.

‘We’ll cover every inch of this island and we won’t stop till we’ve found something, even if it’s only a pile of bones.’

‘Or an angel,’ said Jo.

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor. ‘Indeed.’

But three hours of scouring produced precisely nothing. Jo checked the western half of the island, which took her into several neat little coves and a shallow network of caves. The Doctor, meanwhile, looked in the east, scrambling over boulders and under the braided hair of a waterfall. It was all very beautiful, but none of it yielded anything vaguely resembling life. They met back at the tree with equally puzzled faces.

‘Utterly mysterious,’ said the Doctor.

‘Completely,’ agreed his companion.

‘Well, there’s nothing for it but to go back,’ said the Doctor, and a sense of disappointment entered his voice.

‘Doctor,’ said Jo, as they turned their back on the tree and coconuts and began climbing down again, ‘what date is it today?’

The tall man stood quietly, stubbornly behind his palm tree. The girl and man had both evaporated now, but the original mirage still remained. Gingerly, he made his way across the beach towards it. ‘What strangenesses,’ he was muttering. ‘Thank you dear Lord for delivering these strangenesses unto me on this Christmas Day. And Santa Claus too. Thank you both kindly. You are such kind gents. And what a lovely present this miracle is. It almost looks real with the sun behind it, don’t it? What lovely boxes. It reminds me of my last Christmas with my wifey. She got me a tool booth I remembers,

and inside was all the tools I needed to make my woodens. I used to like to make my woodens, didn't I? There was hummers and neils and sees and saws and a screwdriver. But this box is much much bigger. And it looks so real, like I could almost nearly maybe reach out and touch it.'

The tall man's finger extended out extremely carefully towards the mirage as it faded from sight.

Short Trips: Indefinable Magic

It was cruel to be asked so soon after sending in the completed manuscript of *Indefinable Magic* to pick a favourite story. I was too close to the stories, too close to over 100,000 words to be able to pick a few thousand of them out as the best. The authors had worked so hard and had responded to my call-out for stories so quickly. It was only a matter of four months from being commissioned to edit the collection to editing the anthology. I've worked with brilliant writers, and have been especially pleased to be able to include not only some of my favourites (and I hope readers of the Short Trips collections, too) but also writers who are still relatively new to the world of Doctor Who fiction.

But picking a favourite? I'm not able to do that. I don't have a favourite. So I've included The Fall of the Druids for entirely selfish reasons: it has my favourite Doctor in it, it has Kamelion in it - and he always makes me laugh and should've been brilliant on TV - but, mostly, I've chosen this great story because what happens doesn't reflect well on the Doctor at all. The moral ambiguity of the Doctor in the tale, where he must ensure that time flows as he knows it must, makes for a startling change, but author David N Smith has captured his character brilliantly.

If you haven't read the story before, then I would like to point out that there are other equally marvellous stories in Indefinable Magic. The anthology is available from wherever good books are sold, including the Big Finish website.

Neil Corry

The Fall of the Druids
David N Smith

An adventure of the Fifth Doctor,
with Tegan, Turlough and Kamelion

Tegan stared at the skulls on top of the gateway. To her mind they presented an obvious 'Keep Out' message that required no explanation. To the Doctor, they clearly meant the opposite.

'Come on in, Tegan,' he called back, as he blithely strolled into the settlement. 'And don't worry about the ornamentation. They're just there to fend off evil spirits.'

'They seem to be working,' muttered Tegan, glaring at Turlough as he loitered nervously by the entrance.

She stepped forward hesitantly, looking about warily at the round thatched huts, sturdy animal enclosures and the massive wooden palisade that encircled the entire hilltop settlement. The air was heavy with the smell of wood-fires, compost and dung, all of which recalled happy memories of her father's farm in Brisbane.

'It's definitely Earth,' mumbled Turlough as he cupped a hand over his nose and mouth. 'You can tell from the smell.'

'It's a working farm,' growled Tegan defensively as she threw the boy one of her favourite disparaging looks. 'It's probably a bit much for your delicate senses.'

'It is a very primitive settlement,' Turlough remarked, glancing at the Doctor. 'This must be several hundred years before our previous visit?'

'Judging by the roundhouses, I'd say we're in the late Iron Age,' replied the Doctor, leaning over a fence to scratch an inquisitive ox behind its ear. 'It looks very much like a Celtic hill fort to me.'

‘Hill fort?’ exclaimed Tegan as she gazed around at the wattle- and-daub huts. ‘It’s barely a village!’

‘That’s archaeologists for you,’ he replied, strolling through the animal pens. ‘Always naming things before they have a clue what they are.’

The Doctor stopped, suddenly aware that a young boy had appeared in the doorway of the nearest roundhouse. He was staring at them with wide eyes full of fear.

‘Try to blend in,’ the Doctor whispered to Tegan. ‘Act as if it’s perfectly natural for us to be here.’

Tegan glanced at the boy’s simple woollen garments, and then looked down at her own striking multi-coloured cotton dress. She shot a sceptical frown at the man in his Edwardian cricket outfit.

‘I’m not sure that’s going to work.’

‘Help! Father!’ the boy yelled. ‘Deceangli!’

‘I guess not,’ replied the Doctor dryly.

‘Us? Deceangli?’ cried Turlough incredulously. ‘I don’t think so.

We don’t even know what Deceangli are! Do we?’

‘They were a Celtic tribe from the west of Britain,’ the Doctor commented informatively. ‘With whom we have absolutely no association!’

A burly man with a thick, dark moustache emerged from the roundhouse, stepping protectively in front of the boy, his dark eyes fixed on the Doctor. In his right hand he held a hammer, which looked as if it could normally be used to reshape iron but would also be quite capable of reshaping unwanted strangers.

‘They’re not Deceangli,’ the stocky man told the boy.

‘We’re travellers,’ said the Doctor, doffing his hat politely and giving the man a broad, beaming smile.

‘Without weapons?’

‘I find it keeps me out of trouble,’ replied the Doctor, ignoring the incredulous stares of his companions.

‘More of a druid than a warrior, then?’ the man smiled, clapping a friendly hand on the Doctor’s back. ‘Welcome to Ordovice territory. I am Cadwallon. We should eat, drink and exchange news.’

‘That’s very gracious of you,’ replied the Doctor as he happily allowed himself to be led into one of the larger roundhouses.

Tegan and Turlough exchanged nervous glances.

‘Ladies first,’ Turlough gestured politely.

Tegan rolled her eyes in disdain. She knew she should try to be a little more patient with the boy, but his perpetual nervousness was really beginning to grate on her nerves.

She stepped forward, having to duck her head down to squeeze through the small opening, to discover that the Doctor and Cadwallon had stopped just inside, both surprised by the sudden appearance of another unexpected guest. A dark-haired woman was standing backlit by the flames of the cooking hearth, wrapped in a stained cloak. Her face was concealed beneath a blank, wooden mask.

Cadwallon whispered, his deep voice filled with reverence, ‘Ffion?’ The figure nodded slowly.

The Doctor frowned at the blank face, quietly raising his hand, cautioning Tegan and Turlough not to venture any further into the room. ‘They are coming, Cadwallon.’ Ffion’s voice was soft and light, at odds with the nature of her appearance. ‘The enemy is coming.’

‘The Deceangli?’ queried Turlough, still keen to distance himself from the rival tribe.

‘The Romans,’ whispered the wooden-faced woman.

‘Romans?’ The Doctor looked up, his eyes sparkling with interest. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I have seen the signs.’

‘Ah, you’re a soothsayer,’ the Doctor raised his eyebrows enquiringly. ‘You predict the future?’

‘I am Vate.’ The woman retorted sharply. ‘My words are not vague prophecy. They are fact. It was written in the skies, in wind and in the blood of the dying. The Romans will come this day.’

‘Then we will fight them,’ Cadwallon growled, raising his hammer.

‘Then you will die,’ replied Ffion coldly. ‘You would do better to look to the lives of the children than to throw your own away. If you would fight, then join the forces at Mona.’ The dark-cloaked woman stepped backwards, moving around the smoke that suddenly filled the space where she stood, then disappeared into the shadows at the back of hut.

‘Sadly, friend, there will be no time for food,’ Cadwallon muttered as he turned and walked out of the hut, thinking nothing of Ffion’s vanishing trick. ‘We must prepare to meet the enemy.’

Tegan moved around the fire, hesitantly stepping into the shadows where she had last seen the masked woman.

‘Did she really just disappear into thin air?’ Tegan asked, worried that the question might make her sound foolish.

Turlough shook his head. ‘Impossible. There must be another door,’ he insisted, staring at the solid clay walls.

They both glanced at the Doctor, expecting an answer, but found

him lost in thought.

‘If she’s right about the Romans, then that would make this around the middle of the lst-century AD,’ the Doctor muttered, his eyes suddenly gleaming with excitement. ‘If we’re lucky, we might get the chance to meet Boudicca!’

‘The Killoran sculptor?’ Turlough frowned.

‘The Queen of the Iceni.’ The Doctor’s shoulders sagged. ‘You really didn’t learn anything in that school, did you?’

‘I never saw any reason to take an interest in human history,’ Turlough shrugged dismissively.

‘You might want to revise that opinion,’ Tegan chided, never one to miss an opportunity to put the boy in his place, ‘now that you’re stood in the middle of it.’

Turlough glared at her and said, ‘I could or, given that they’re about to start killing each other, we could just go back to the TARDIS and leave.’

‘Leave?’ the Doctor repeated, sounding almost petulant. But we’ve only just arrived.’

‘So?’ Tegan cut in, seeing the disappointment flooding into the Doctor’s eyes. ‘Turlough’s right. For once. Do we really want to get caught up in the middle of a war?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Very well. I suppose it is the sensible thing to do.’ He led the way back into the daylight, pausing briefly to push his hat back on, before realising the whole village was in chaos. Tegan saw Cadwallon lift his son into a horse-drawn cart and kiss him briefly on the forehead. The sadness in their eyes was obvious. Father and son both knew this was no ordinary goodbye.

At that moment a distant thundering noise began, causing the worried Celts to fall silent as frightened eyes turned towards the east In the distance, a vast plume of dust was rising and

discolouring the sky, while from beneath the brown cloud were emerging hundreds of Roman soldiers, their armour and spear-tips glinting in the sunlight.

‘Come on!’ Turlough yelled, lurching forward into the crowd of frightened people. ‘We can still make it back to the TARDIS!’

He scrambled forward, racing back out of the eastern gateway. Tegan hurried after him, but froze in horror as she saw a Roman rider gallop across her path.

The rider thrust his spear towards her. She felt the blade pierce her side.

Tegan stumbled backwards, falling into the Doctor’s arms. He carried her unceremoniously into the back of the horse-drawn cart among the terrified children.

‘Cadwallon, please!’ the Doctor yelled, as the villagers battled to shut the gates. You cannot win this!’

‘I am not afraid to die,’ Cadwallon growled. ‘But save your friend! Save Lythan!’

The Doctor nodded, his face filled with regret as he leapt up onto the cart and picked up the reins and whip. With a single crack of leather and a yell from the Doctor, the cart plunged forwards, driving through the settlement and out through the western gateway.

‘Lythan!’ the Doctor called back to Cadwallon’s son. ‘Where’s the safest place to go!’

‘The island!’ shouted the boy, pointing a trembling arm out towards the sea. ‘To Mona!’

Tegan tried to sit up, to see where the boy was pointing, but the effort suddenly seemed too great.

The Doctor looked back at her. She followed his gaze. The cloth of

her dress had been stained red.

Blood. Her blood.

She closed her eyes.

She heard the Doctor crack the whip once more.

Tegan woke up in darkness.

Gradually, as her eyes adjusted, a weak firelight from across the room was illuminating the wooden rafters above her and the curved clay wall that encircled her. She was pressed between warm blankets of animal fur and a thick, straw mattress, which were managing to keep her warm despite the fact that she could see her breath fogging in the cold air. She could hear the sound of a boy - it must be Lythan - gently sobbing at the foot of the bed, while she could see the Doctor, sitting thoughtfully, silhouetted against the flames of a small hearth.

'The girl will live,' cut a cold voice through the darkness, coming from inches away from her face. Tegan turned in shock, peering up into the gloom until suddenly she could make out the dark shape of a wooden face hovering over her.

'You have my thanks, Ffion.' The Doctor turned away from the fire, his face lost in shadow.

Tegan tried to sit up but a stabbing pain in her side stopped her. On reflex she reached a hand towards her wound, her fingers discovering linen bindings had covered it.

'I thought I was dead,' Tegan whispered, as she stared up at the impassive wooden mask.

'You almost were,' remarked the Doctor as he stood and walked towards them. 'You almost certainly would have been without Ffion's help.'

'How?'

‘These hands hold the sacred power of healing,’ Ffion, still in her mask, turned to examine her own very human and delicate fingers. ‘Now rest. You will need your strength for the battles ahead.’

Ffion stood and nodded curtly at the Doctor. She reached out a hand to the red-eyed Lythan, who clasped it tightly in his own, before they both stepped out through the doorway.

Tegan frowned up at the Doctor as he stared down at her, his hands in his pockets and his face unreadable. ‘Did she heal me with magic?’

‘More likely herbal painkillers and a skilled hand with a needle and thread.’

‘You said she was a soothsayer,’ said Tegan as she tried again to sit up, ‘not a doctor.’

‘She’s a Vate. It’s one of three important roles in the Celtic spiritual world. The others are the Druid and the Bard, but they’re all people of learning,’ the Doctor replied quietly. ‘She’ll have spent many years training in medicine and, shall we say, more otherworldly arts. The people here don’t separate them as you or I might. In many ways, to these people, they’re one and the same. The knowledge and wisdom has been amassed and passed on for hundreds of years, through stories, songs and by rote, While they are highly skilled in writing and reading, they never commit their wisdom to paper, always wary of how the knowledge could be abused by the uninitiated.’

Tegan frowned, confused by the sense of wonder she could hear in her friend’s voice.

‘I’m grateful either way,’ she murmured, her tiredness and gratitude softening her usual irascible tone. ‘But what about Turlough?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied the Doctor as he sat down on the edge of the bed, finally turning his face towards the firelight. ‘Last time I saw him, he was heading for the TARDIS.’

‘Not very reliable, is he?’ Tegan muttered. ‘Always running off. Never a thought for anyone else.’

The Doctor let out an exasperated sigh.

‘Oh, it takes more than being speared to stop me mouthing off,’ she said, almost laughing, before a fresh jolt of pain made her gasp and her eyes water. ‘Where are we anyway?’ she asked after getting her breath back.

‘Ah,’ the Doctor mumbled. ‘I was rather hoping you weren’t going to ask that.’

‘Where?’ Tegan barked.

‘We crossed the sea channel by boat, put the water between the Romans and us. We’re on the Isle of Mona, in the druidic training centre, the very heart of the Celtic spiritual world.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘You wouldn’t.’ replied the Doctor, still seemingly keen to avoid her gaze. ‘The Romans destroyed it, slaughtering every man, woman and child.’

‘I love travelling with a Time Lord. So many history lessons I didn’t know I didn’t want to learn.’ Tegan scowled at him, pulling up the animal skin blanket tightly under her chin, knowing she already knew the answer to the question she was about to ask. ‘When will all this happen?’

‘Best guess?’ he paused. ‘A day, maybe two.’ ‘Then we have to get out of here.’

‘We can’t,’ the Doctor replied, finally turning to look her straight in the eye. ‘The Romans have taken the opposite shore. We’re penned in.’

Turlough shivered, frozen to the core from having spent the night

lying in a damp, rocky hole by the river. He peered cautiously out of his hiding place towards the blue police box that stood by the bank, a sense of relief flooding through him. Even if the Doctor and Tegan had been killed then at least he would still be able to escape from the Earth and its brutal, primitive inhabitants.

Glancing downstream he could see a group of Roman soldiers washing in the cold waters, laughing and joking, but all with their swords and spears within easy reach. He knew he would need to be quick to cross the gap to the TARDIS before they noticed him.

Why hadn't the Doctor and Tegan just run, like he'd said? If they had, they would all be there now. They would all have been able to get in the TARDIS and go. Instead, it was just him and another desperate run for freedom.

He sprang forward, crouching and running as fast as he could until the tall blue doors loomed before him. He put his hand against the wood and pushed, but the doors refused to open. Hope was replaced by panic. Gripping hold of the handle, he pulled, then pushed, rattling the door in its frame. Nothing! In his mind's eye he could clearly see the Doctor closing the TARDIS door behind him. He slammed his fist against the wood. He was furious that, after everything he had been through, he was about to die as just another faceless victim in someone else's war.

Then the door opened.

Shocked and surprised, but never one to miss an opportunity to survive, Turlough leapt inside. Dashing forward, he collided with the console and slammed his hand down on the nearest lever. His eyes darted sideways, suddenly aware of the figure leaning on the console.

'You let me in?'

Kamelion slowly turned his face towards Turlough.

'You appeared to be in some distress,' the machine replied calmly.

‘I’m grateful,’ Turlough muttered, straightening his tie, as he eyed the silver android with suspicion. ‘But what are you doing in the control room?’

‘It was merely a random chance,’ Kamelion replied, tilting his head. ‘I was accessing the databanks.’

‘Really?’

‘I would not lie,’ Kamelion raised his chin, as if his pride had somehow been dented by the suggestion.

‘Oh, you would.’ Turlough stepped away, turning his attention to the console. ‘It’s what you were built for.’

Turlough moved his hands across the console, checking the co-ordinates and read-outs.

‘What is it that you are attempting to do?’ Kamelion enquired in his calm and precise manner, his eyes following Turlough’s movements.

Turlough sighed, unsure how to tell the android what had happened, or how it would react to the news.

‘I think the Doctor and Tegan are dead,’ he said bluntly.

The robot’s head dipped slightly.

‘But I think I can get us out of here,’ Turlough said softly, unsure why he was attempting to reassure a machine. ‘Away from Earth, at any rate.’

Kamelion raised his chin, levelling his dark eyes at Turlough.

‘Your information is incorrect,’ the machine purred, as a metal finger stabbed a button on the console. ‘This scanner setting is keyed to the Doctor’s brain pattern. He is alive and well, approximately twenty kilometres north of this position.’

Turlough rounded the console, glancing from the android to the

monitor screen, unable to believe his eyes. There was a single blue diamond gently pulsing away at the edge of a map of an island. He should have known better than to doubt the Doctor's ability to get out of seemingly impossible situations.

'If they are in danger,' Kamelion began, its eyes seeming to stare straight through Turlough, 'then we should assist them.'

'There's nothing we can do,' Turlough protested, pointing at the coastline. 'The Roman army is camped along here. Between us and the Doctor.'

Kamelion lowered his eyes. 'I am programmed for covert military operations.'

A blaze of red light erupted around the android's silver body, swirling around him as his form suddenly shifted. Turlough took a step back as the machine's stiff, metal face became soft flesh and a military uniform seemed to materialise in the air around him as his form broadened into that of an imposing, square-jawed Roman centurion.

Kamelion looked at his feet, wriggled his toes in his sandals and then grinned at Turlough.

'I will be able to acquire a uniform for you from their camp,' he said in a deep, accented voice. He strode around the console and activated the scanner, turning to watch the main screen open onto a view of green hills and valleys. 'But we will need a local guide.'

With another twist of the centurion's hand the screen zoomed in on a battered and bloody figure hiding among the river reeds.

Turlough stepped up to the screen and stared into the familiar but frightened face that cowered behind the grass.

'Cadwallon,' he whispered. 'He survived.'

'Can you persuade him to assist us?' Kamelion asked, the centurion's dark brown eyes seeming to glimmer with enthusiasm.

Turlough hesitated, aware that he was being included in the machine's foolhardy plan.

'Yes,' he said reluctantly, 'of course I can.'

The Doctor stood on the clifftop, hands deep in his pockets, watching the distant shore. He could see the Romans on the mainland beach, as they worked on the construction of a fleet of wooden boats. He knew it wouldn't be long before they reached the island. History itself left him in no doubt of the bloody and violent day that lay ahead. He bowed his head, for once feeling powerless against unfolding events. Time and tide wait for no man. Not even a Time Lord. The weight of his knowledge suddenly felt heavy. It was a burden, he knew, but it was one he had been taught to carry without complaint.

He was distracted by a soft, feminine voice behind him. 'They will not cross the channel today. I have turned the wind against them.'

'Oh, Ffion,' the Doctor replied without turning, 'ifyou could do that, then we would be safe forever.'

Ffion laughed. 'Tomorrow the people will be ready for battle.'

The Doctor frowned, glancing back at the masked woman. Behind her, trudging across the rough ground, snaked a line of white-robed men, their middle-aged faces set with stern resolve.

'Druids,' the Doctor smiled, allowing a measure of respect into his voice. 'Men of peace and learning, lawgivers, judges, advisers. Not much use in a war, surely?'

'They have other talents that can be employed on the battlefield.'

'So, the Druids and the Votes are here,' said the Doctor as he watched the figures move towards the shore. 'What about the Bards?'

'They will sing tales of our victory.'

‘I wish I could share your optimism.’

Ffion chuckled, her eyes gleaming from behind the hard, wooden mask. ‘You have the audacity to call yourself a Lord of Time? Yet you are more its slave than its master!’

The Doctor balked.

‘Oh, we know the future you believe will happen. But it shall not come to pass.’

‘How could you know who I am and what will happen?’ he asked, feeling a chill as he stared at the wooden face.

‘The wisdom taught here on Mona is more ancient and more powerful than you will ever know.’

‘Is it really?’ The Doctor glared at the woman. ‘Or did you just listen in on a private conversation?’

‘Don’t underestimate us, Doctor. We have the power to destroy our enemy.’

The Doctor hesitated, doubts blossoming in his mind.

‘What power?’ he asked, stepping up to tower over the woman.

‘How could you possibly stop an entire Roman legion?’

‘I am not about to share our secrets with you,’ the woman seethed. ‘Your loyalties do not lie with us. You have your own cause, do you not?’

The Doctor stepped back, suddenly wary of how much the woman knew or had guessed.

‘Time’s flow cannot be changed, Ffion,’ the Doctor insisted. ‘It’s too strong.’

‘Even the most powerful river may be dammed, diverted, bridged or crossed.’ The woman in the wooden mask walked slowly towards him, coming so close that he could feel her hot breath on his skin.

‘We have the power to stop the enemy, Doctor. And you should be glad of it.’ The woman’s eyes narrowed behind the slits in her mask. ‘If your prophecy comes true, it means the deaths of you, your friend, of all of us. I offer life. Are you such a fool that you would cling so tightly to your beliefs?’

She left the question hanging in the air, her eyes desperately trying to read the Doctor’s impassive face. He said nothing, neither daring to answer nor wanting to.

Ffion snorted her disapproval. ‘You are afraid of what you know you can do. Why? Is it cowardice? If so, it is a weakness that I do not share. You saved many lives from the slaughter at the village, so I will choose to believe that you are not our enemy.’ She pulled her black cloak tight around her and turned away. ‘Make sure you do not become one.’

Turlough felt ridiculous. They may have called it a Roman military uniform but to him it still felt like a jerkin, sandals and a skirt. Much to his annoyance, it also appeared that Kamelion was enjoying the whole experience. The awkward, retiring robot was gone, replaced by an energetic centurion, one perfectly at ease in the Roman camp. He gave orders, laughed at jokes, discussed tactics with the senior officers and had become irritatingly popular with what seemed like the entire legion. Kamelion’s plan was simple. By infiltrating the Roman camp the three of them had gained access to the resources they needed to reach the island. They would slip across in the attack, then rescue the Doctor and Tegan. Simple enough, but insanely dangerous if you put any value on your own life.

Turlough took comfort from the fact that Cadwallon seemed even more nervous, which was hardly a surprise given that he was one Celt surrounded by thousands of Romans. The worried man was nervously fingering his upper lip, from which he had cut off his thick Celtic moustache so that he could blend in with his clean-

shaven enemies.

‘I can’t believe you stayed to fight,’ said Turlough as they watched the first few Roman boats set sail for the island, taking advantage of that morning’s shift in wind.

‘I have no fear of dying,’ the man explained earnestly. ‘I believe my stay in the Otherworld will be short, I will soon be reborn in a new body, in a new life.’

‘Reincarnation?’

‘You do not believe?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Turlough tried to hide his scorn of the beliefs of this primitive but brave man. He suddenly recalled his own past. ‘When I lost my mother, I knew it was forever.’

‘It is why you run.’ Cadwallon said softly, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. ‘Why I ran.’

‘At least you were prepared to fight.’

‘But my death would have parted me from my son. Forever. Remember Ffion’s words?’

‘You listened to the soothsayer?’ queried Turlough, unable to stop a smile from slipping across his face.

‘Always,’ Cadwallon shrugged. ‘She is never wrong.’

They fell into a thoughtful silence as they pushed their boat out into the water, but the quiet was soon shattered by the arrival of Kamelion. The square-jawed Roman centurion splashed through the water, leaping into the boat with a grin, followed seconds later by a handful of excited Roman auxiliaries. Cadwallon and Turlough barely had time to scramble aboard before the oars hit the water.

‘Come on!’ Kamelion shouted at the bedraggled troops. ‘I want us to be the first on that island! Get rowing!’

The auxiliaries did not hesitate. They leapt into action, all eager to obey their orders. In minutes, the boat was at the leading edge of the fleet. As they approached the island, Turlough spotted the opposing force waiting on the dunes. Dozens of white-robed figures stood in a circle. Gathered around them were hundreds of rugged and tattooed warriors waving their swords angrily in the air. He thought he saw the Doctor standing at the back with his hands in his pockets and wearing his panama hat, watching the Roman army slip across the water.

Kamelion's vessel was indeed the first to hit the beach and he was the first one down into the surf, hurriedly pulling it up onto the land, while dozens more boats came ashore around them.

A series of fires suddenly burst into life behind the ranks of the Celts. Bathed in the light, the Druids raised their arms to the sky and began to chant, their voices thundering in unison. Seconds later, dozens of black-cloaked women emerged from the ranks of the warriors, each carrying a flaming torch, their dark hair streaming in wind as their wailing voices joined the chorus against the invaders.

The Romans stopped in their tracks. Hundreds ofRoman soldiers found themselves paralysed. Many turned pale, some tried to glance at their companions, but the vast majority were completely frozen, staring in horror at the Celts, mesmerised and transfixed.

Turlough knew it must be Ffion at the top of the largest rock on the cliff As he watched the wooden mask gazing down on the terrified army, he suddenly realised he could move, that he alone seemed to be unaffected by the paralysis. He wanted to run.

'You came to slaughter us,' Ffion yelled. 'But the gods themselves defend this place! And you are nothing but mortal men!' Turlough looked along the line of Celts, noticing with horror that a large number of their warriors were notching arrows and drawing back their bowstrings.

Turlough turned to Cadwallon's wide-eyed face. 'Run!' he screamed,

but all the man could do was whimper and point at Ffion as she loomed over them. Turlough grabbed the terrified man and hauled him over his shoulder, trying desperately to ignore the whistle of the first deadly rain of arrows.

The Doctor watched as Ffion lowered her torch, signalling the bowmen to fire their first volley. The sky was suddenly filled with arrows, arcing upwards, and then accelerating down towards paralysed Roman troops. 'You shouldn't be able to do this! You must stop this slaughter!' the Doctor shouted, making no attempt to hide his anger.

Ffion didn't even glance at him. She said nothing, her blank mask hiding any expression the Doctor might read. The arrows fell on the defenceless Roman troops. Those that were hit became free of the paralysis in their last, desperate seconds of life. The soldiers' screams were so loud that they blotted out the Druids' chanting.

'We will -' Ffion began, but her sentence was cut short, as the Doctor grabbed hold of her cloak and pulled. She tottered on top of the rock.

'I can't let you do this, Ffion. 1 can't let you win!' the Doctor cried, his voice cracking with desperation. 'History demands I stop you!'

He tugged again, pulling her off the rock, sending her flailing to the ground. She crashed into the earth, the flaming torch spinning away from her hand, her mask falling from her face.

From the beach below there came a cry of hundreds of voices. Suddenly, the Roman troops were moving again, storming up the beach towards the Celts.

The Doctor frowned, looking down at the wooden mask lying in the mud. He knelt down, picked up the mask and held it up to the firelight. He pulled his glasses from his pocket, flipped them open and pushed them onto his nose.

'The spell is broken,' the Doctor muttered as he studied the mask, before peering over the rim of his glasses at the black-cloaked figure

that was struggling to stand in the muddy ground.

The face that looked back at him was pale and beautiful, her eyes impossibly deep with sorrow, with a single tear running down her left cheek.

‘You have brought death upon us all,’ the woman whispered.

The Doctor stared at her, frowning at how small and human she really was.

Turlough scrambled up the rocks, all too aware people were dying on the beach behind him. He had been forced to literally haul Cadwallon away from the danger, but the man finally seemed to have returned to his senses. Turlough paused briefly at the top of a rocky bluff, watching as the charging Roman troops collided with the Celtic warriors, searching for a glimpse ofKamelion among the chaos.

Turning his attention away from the fighting, he saw Cadwallon hurrying towards the Doctor and Ffion. They had both seen the Doctor pull the woman from the rock, watched as she had fallen backwards, shattering the moment of awe that she had commanded over the stupefied Romans. He could see that she was now standing beside the Doctor, her unmasked face pretty and pale in the firelight, but her eyes filled with anger and defeat. She spared Turlough and Cadwallon only a glance before running towards the battle, towards where her people were dying.

Cadwallon watched her go.

The Doctor wasted no time on pleasantries: ‘You weren’t affected by the paralysis?’ It was barely a question.

‘Standing still when your life is danger has never seemed very bright to me,’ remarked Turlough pointedly, glancing towards the fighting.

The Doctor nodded but turned his attention to the mask he was holding, flipping it over and over in his hands.

‘Perhaps your non-human biology protected you,’ the Doctor suggested, never taking his eyes off the wooden face.

‘Or perhaps I’m very good at running away.’

The Doctor shot him a cold stare.

‘Can we please have this conversation somewhere safer?’ asked Turlough, ignoring the Doctor’s expression. He realised he would need a different tack to thaw the Time Lord’s icy temperament. ‘Where’s Tegan?’

‘And my son?’ Cadwallon added.

The Doctor’s face unfroze in a heartbeat. He whipped off his glasses and nicked them away inside his jacket, as if finally aware of the screaming, fighting and fires all around them.

‘This way,’ he said, ‘and quickly.’

Tegan woke to the sound of battle. She struggled to prop herself up on her elbows, only able to watch as Lythan picked up a small iron blade and hid nervously by the doorway. She knew that if the Romans found them then they were dead. The boy was no match for a Roman legionary and she didn’t have the strength to move, let alone fight.

She held her breath as a figure loomed in the doorway.

A massive, threatening Roman strode towards them, his hard face blackened by smoke and mud, a short sword gripped firmly in his right hand. Lythan pounced from his hiding place, his tiny knife clashing uselessly against his opponent’s armour. The soldier grabbed and twisted the boy’s forearm, forcing him to drop the knife. Their only weapon clattered uselessly to the floor.

The Roman turned his dark eyes towards Tegan and gave her a grin. ‘I apologise ifI scared you, Tegan. How are you feeling?’ he asked, his face frowning in concern as he continued to keep the boy in the

arm lock. ‘What?’ she yelled, confusion and alarm clouding her brain. ‘Who are you?’

‘It’s me,’ the centurion replied, looking slightly hurt by the lack of recognition. ‘Kamelion.’

‘Oh.’ Tegan slumped back onto the straw mattress. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I thought that much was obvious. I was under the impression you needed assistance,’ the centurion replied, letting go of Lythan who had stopped struggling, realising the man was, somehow, Tegan’s friend. Kamelion rubbed a broad hand over the child’s cropped hair. ‘This was the last location that the TARDIS scanners placed the Doctor’s life-signs before we came looking for you.’

‘We?’

‘Myself and Turlough.’

‘And very grateful we are,’ replied the Doctor as he stepped into the roundhouse. ‘Aren’t we?’

‘Yes, of course,’ agreed Tegan tersely, annoyed by the implication that she would somehow be unappreciative of being rescued, even by Turlough.

‘The Romans are winning the battle,’ the Doctor told them. ‘They’re destroying the buildings, burning the sacred groves. Hundreds of people are dying.’

‘There’s nothing you could have done,’ Tegan bit her lip, unsure what more to say. She knew from bitter experience how a moment like this would hurt him, but she realised there were no more words of comfort she could offer.

‘They’re putting the entire Druidic culture to the sword. With no written records, everything these people were, all their wisdom, their knowledge and their culture will be lost forever. It’s the end of an entire world.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Tegan tried, frightened by the horror in his voice. He said nothing for a moment. He just stared at her with weary, empty eyes.

‘It won’t be long before they find us.’

Tegan stared at him, unsure what to say, waiting for him to continue, wanting him to explain how he was going to save them.

‘What would you like me to do?’ Kamelion asked quietly.

‘Stand outside,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Tell them not to come in.’ Kamelion nodded and obeyed.

‘That’s the plan?’ Tegan gasped. ‘That’s never going to work!’

‘Father!’ Lythan leapt up as Cadwallon entered the roundhouse. Tegan allowed herself a smile, glad to witness the reunion of father and son. Even Turlough, who was skulking in the doorway, looked happy for them.

‘We will fight them when they come,’ Cadwallon whispered in his son’s ear, clearly keen to reassure the terrified boy. ‘We will die together.’

This was not the reunion Tegan had been hoping for. She turned her gaze on the Doctor as he stood in the centre of the room, silently staring at the mask in his hands.

‘There must be something you can do,’ Tegan cried.

The Doctor looked up. ‘It’s possible that Ffion was using this mask to access a low-level psychic field. If so, there’s no reason I can’t do the same. I can create a perception filter around us, so the Romans will never know we’re here.’

Turlough coughed sceptically. ‘I’m sorry, but what psychic field would that be?’

‘A generation of worship and belief would be more than enough to create a psychic field and imbue the mask with the ability to channel the energies involved.’

‘On a scale large enough to freeze thousands of professional Roman soldiers?’ Turlough scoffed. ‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘You’d need a power source close by, one that was functioning on the same psychic wavelength. A large amount of tinclavic perhaps.’

Turlough stopped dead. ‘Kamelion?’

‘It’s how he’s able to adapt his appearance so perfectly,’ the Doctor replied. ‘By showing you exactly what you expect to see. It’s possible that Ffion deliberately summoned him to the battlefield.’

‘That’s a bit of a leap,’ Turlough muttered softly. ‘You don’t need psychic fields to explain any of this.’

The Doctor ignored him, sitting cross-legged on the floor, lifting the mask to his face and then gently pulling its leather strap tight behind his head. He closed his eyes, while the featureless wooden mask flickered in the hearth light. Finally the Doctor sighed, opened his eyes and pulled off the mask. ‘The perception filter is now in place,’ he said confidently.

‘If there is a psychic field,’ muttered Turlough, never one to let his opinion be ignored.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor nodded. ‘If.’

Tegan laid her head back on the straw.

‘If,’ she said. ‘I remember telling Nyssa that my dad thought “if” was the most powerful word in the English language.’

‘Really? I’d have chosen “escaped”,’ muttered Turlough. ‘Or “free”. Or even just “alive”.’

They stared at the door. The battle beyond it was terrifying them

all. There was no doubt the Celts were being massacred. Lives were being lost and history was being written. All they could do was endure it.

Kamelion stood guard over the roundhouse for two days. Usually the house was ignored, but occasionally some of the Roman soldiers would wander too close and he would need to forcefully order them away. There were times when Cadwallon had wanted to leave the safety of the house, for him and his son to join the battle, but the Doctor always managed to persuade him to stay. Despite his many protests, there was only relief burning in Cadwallon's eyes as he clung fiercely to his son.

On the dawn of the third day, Kamelion saw the last of the soldiers climb back aboard their boats and set sail for the mainland.

The Doctor stepped out into the dawn light to watch the soldiers go. Tegan, able to walk but still in pain, followed him, clearly keen not to stray too far from his protection. The smell of the smoking remains of the sacred groves and roundhouses couldn't disguise the smell of death.

'They left earlier than I expected,' Kamelion observed dispassionately. Tegan envied him his apparent lack of emotion.

'News from the mainland, I expect,' the Doctor replied as he watched the boats sail away. 'Boudicca has begun her rebellion. Many tribes will unite behind her, which isn't a surprise given what's just happened here.'

'There was nothing you could do stop it.' Tegan laid a hand on the Time Lord's arm, once more giving voice to those few words of comfort. 'We all know you can't change history'

'Really?' queried Turlough, as he stood in the entrance of the roundhouse. 'From where I was standing it looked like he made it happen.'

The Doctor unrolled his hat and pulled it on, the action preventing him from having to look into the eyes of his companions.

‘We should get back to the TARDIS,’ he muttered briefly, echoing Turlough’s sentiment of only days before. He set off in the direction of the beach.

‘What about the mask?’ Tegan called after him. ‘You can’t just leave it here, can you?’

‘It’s burning on the hearth,’ he replied, without looking back. Kamelion watched as Turlough and Tegan said their goodbyes to Cadwallon and Lythan, before they turned and headed after the Doctor. The android followed silently behind them.

Once inside the relative safety of the TARDIS, Kamelion let his appearance shift back to its default setting. The image of the content centurion faded away. He knew that his biological companions still had unanswered questions. They were struggling to understand and come to terms with the events that had occurred on the island. He could sense the emotional turmoil coming off them in waves. He himself was not concerned with such issues. He had enjoyed his rare journey outside the safety of TARDIS, but whether it had been of his own choice or that of an outside influence now seemed largely irrelevant.

He stood by the hatstand, awaiting further instructions and watched the others interact. Biological entities were always so interesting.

‘So?’ Tegan asked as the Doctor set the console’s coordinates. The Doctor looked up, his eyes full of innocence.

‘So?’

‘Was there ever a psychic field?’ Turlough asked bluntly, his eyes betraying his uncertainty.

The Doctor punched a single button, examining the results on a monitor, his face as unreadable as Ffion’s mask.

‘If there was, then it’s gone now. Lost perhaps, along with so much else.’ He sighed. ‘You were there. You tell me.’

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Seven Deadly Sins
edited by **David Bailey**

The darker side of human nature is a terrible place. Its twisted pathways and dismal corners lie ready to lead even the most virtuous traveller astray. The Doctor tries to stand against the tide, but what good is it when he cannot even save himself from the seven deadly sins? Alone, these seven stories tell tales of misadventure and misery. Together, they reveal an even darker story...

Featuring stories by **David Bailey, John Binns, Rebecca Levene, Jacqueline Rayner, Paul Magrs, Tara Samms, Gareth Wigmore** *and* **Mark Wright!**

A Day in the Life
edited by **Ian Farrington**

When you're time travellers, the concept of a day - from midnight to midnight - can get lost: the Doctor and his companions arrive on different planets in different eras at different times of the day. Throughout his adventures, the Doctor meets many people - security guards on a night shift, mysterious travellers riding the vortex, a family sitting down to watch TV - but all too often their interaction is brief... Time, it seems, is very much of the essence.

Featuring stories by **Dan Abnett, Trevor Baxendale, Nev Fountain, Simon Guerrier, Joseph Lidster** *and more!*

The Solar System
edited by **Gary Russell**

A star like many others in the western spire of the Milky Way galaxy. Around it, orbit its planets - each one has its own environments, its own history, its own circumstances. The third planet of the ten is the most densely populated. And over time, its inhabitants have reached out to the other worlds. There they find surprises, wonders, danger... Welcome to the solar system.

Featuring stories by **Jim Mortimore, Craig Hinton, Alison Lawson, Dale Smith, Trevor Baxendale** *and more!*

The History of Christmas
edited by **Simon Guerrier**

Christmas is a time for many things. For giving, for receiving, for feasts and celebration. For huddling round the warmth of the fire, sheltered from the dark and the cold outside. And the monsters. It's also the busiest time of year for the Doctor, whether he's caught up in ancient Rome, taking Leonardo da Vinci on a day trip to the stars or popping in on the first Christmas on the moon. Spend Christmas with the Doctor. If you dare...

Featuring stories by **Marc Piatt, Jonathan Clements, Eddie Robson, Joseph Lidster** *and more!*

Farewells
edited by **Jacqueline Rayner**

Sometimes it's easy to say goodbye - to a friend, to a way of life, to a lover. Sometimes it's heartbreaking. And sometimes they just won't take the hint. Say hello to 14 stories of goodbyes as the Fourth Doctor contemplates his mortality after a funeral, a young man goes to murderous lengths to stop Jo from leaving him, the First Doctor considers his flight from Gallifrey and the Fifth Doctor desperately tries to get rid ofan unwanted companion.

Featuring stories by **Paul Magrs, Steve Lyons, Steven A Roman** *and more!*

The Centenarian
edited by **Ian Farrington**

There is nothing special about Edward Grainger. His life is much like any other - full of family and friends, love and passion, incidents and turning points. He travels, works, laughs and cries. He has parents, a wife, a child, a grandchild. He lives life to the full. There is nothing special about Edward Grainger. Except... from the day he was born, until the day he will die, he keeps meeting the Doctor. Sometimes a different Doctor, sometimes the same Doctor. There is nothing special about Edward Grainger.

Featuring stories by **Glen McCoy, Stel Pavlou, LJ Scott, Steven Savile** *and more!*

Time Signature
edited by **Simon Guerrier**

A city destroyed by time itself. A country torn apart by revolution. A man in a boat with a biscuit tin. The Doctor doesn't just change the lives of those around him. His actions echo through history. Shaping the universe, changing it, rewriting it in his own hand. But making it better? It's a good job he never sticks around for long. And yet, for all that the universe may be infinite, for all he keeps moving, the Doctor can't outrun the consequences forever.

Featuring stories by **Ben Aaronovitch, Andrew Cartmel, Marc Piatt, Matthew Sweet** *and more!*

Dalek Empire
edited by **Nicholas Briggs** with **Simon Guerrier**

Meet the infamous metallic monsters in a collection that draws upon the events and themes of Big Finish's acclaimed series Dalek Empire. But never fear, no prior knowledge is necessary. The Doctor is on hand to guide us through the terrible events before, after and during the Daleks' ruthless onslaught.

Featuring stories by **Justin Richards, Joseph Lidster, James Swallow** *and more!*

Destination Prague
edited by **Steven Savile**

Prague has its demons... A city saved from the ravages of war and the Third Reich because of its beauty. Astronomy, astrology and numerology have all played a role in building the city - but how will they influence its future? How will it adapt over the centuries to come? And what will be the role of the old superstitions in the new world? For the Doctor and his companions the answers to these questions are only just the start of further mysteries...

Featuring stories by **Stel Pavlou, Brian Keene, Keith RA DeCandido, James Swallow, Sean Williams** *and more!*

Snapshots
edited by **Joseph Lidster**

A mysterious ghost haunts a hotel in India... The terrifying alien C'rizz attacks commuters in Kings Cross Station... And, on a distant world, an old man trades stories with a mysterious time traveller. Throughout his adventures, the Doctor meets so many people and each one is affected in some way. What is it like when that strange blue box appears in your world and you're given just the briefest snapshot of the Doctor's life? When everything changes?

Featuring stories by **Helen Raynor, Brian Dooley, Paul Magrs, Stel Pavlou, Colin Harvey, Lizzie Hopley** *and more!*

The Ghosts of Christmas
edited by **C Scott** and **M Wright**

Christmas. A time for home. For family. For laughter... Everybody has special memories of Christmas, but for others it brings shadows of things that should not have been. Unearthly visitors who open their eyes to new worlds and new experiences. Pantomime coats, robot dogs and a big blue box parked beneath the Christmas tree. The Doctor and his companions travel to Christmases Past, Present and Yet to Come. Christmas. A time for terror. For fear. For ghosts...

Featuring stories by **Joseph Lidster, Dan Abnett, Trevor Baxendale, Steven Savile** *and more!*

Defining Patterns
edited by **Ian Farrington**

The universe is home to countless trillions of lives, all interweaving with each other and affecting the line of history. Everywhere he looks, the Doctor sees the same events, decisions and actions cropping up again and again. Look at the bigger picture, however, and maybe - just maybe - you'll see how the universe works. But, as the Doctor and his companions discover, are these patterns really there? Or do we, by the very nature of seeing them, define them?

Featuring stories by **Ian Briggs, Mat Coward, Steven Savile** *and more!*

The Quality of Leadership
edited by **Keith RA DeCandido**

King Loran of Zalezna is dead and young Prince Mihal faces the prospect of being a leader before he's ready. To help him, the Doctor tells him of the leaders he has met over the course of his lives... Leadership comes in many forms. Some are unexpected, some are less pleasant than you'd think, and some aren't quite what history would later paint them to be.

Featuring stories by **Peter David, Diane Duane, James Swallow, Steven Savile** *and more!*

Transmissions
edited by **Richard Salter**

If you lost the ability to communicate, what would your life be like? Messages, and the media we use to convey them, surround us every minute of every day. The Doctor knows how important it is to be understood. Whether he is striving to cure a disease that turns words into gibberish, responding to an SOS from the end of time, or unravelling secret messages encoded into the genetic sequences that make up life itself this Time Lord always knows how to make himself heard.

Featuring stories by **Lou Anders, George Mann, Dan Abnett, Andy Lane, Steve Lyons** *and more!*

How the Doctor Changed My Life
edited by **Simon Guerrier**

The schoolboy whose twin brother vanished in the night. A woman whose house teems with alien refugees. The dad who dies every evening... All through space and time live people, ordinary people, whose lives have been turned upside down. People who've lost jobs and loved ones, or seen their homes destroyed, or found themselves on whole other planets. They've nothing in common with one another except that their lives can never be the same. Because they're people who've encountered the Doctor.

Featuring 25 original stories from 25 new authors - the winners of a competition to seek out bold new uniting talent! With a foreword by **Paul Cornell.**

Christmas Around the World
edited by **Xanna Chown**

Christmas is a time for festivities, family and fun. It's also a time for action, adventures... and aliens. Spend Christmas with the Doctor as he joins celebrations around the globe, from the pagan past to the distant future, taking in the frozen waters of the Arctic, the rainforests of Papua New Guinea and even a trip to the planet Gloricious. Christmas is an interesting time of year when the Doctor's about. In fact, it's out of this world.

Featuring stories by **Andrew Cartmel, Simon Guerrier, Rebecca Levene, James Moran, Kate Orman, Andrew Pidoux, Eddie Robson** *and more!*

Indefinable Magic
edited by **Neil Corry**

A plot to kidnap Elvis... A woman whose horoscopes prove rather too accurate... A devastating army of mythical beasts that conquers Britain... The Doctor and his travelling companions live magical lives - but their lives are tainted by terror. Delve into bizarre, wondrous or horrifying worlds with the Doctor as he lands on a planet where everyone can fly, helps a friend trapped in the past, and faces aliens that want to bring peace to humanity.

Featuring stories by **James Goss, Simon Guerrier, Gareth Roberts, Eddie Robson** *and more!*

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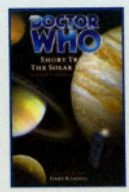
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